SPHERE

BOOK FOUR

THE BROTHERS

Based on the BBC TV Series

Lee Mackenzie

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The Brothers

Book 4

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CHAPTER ONE

THE telephone number of the hotel was scribbled among others at the back of Edward's diary. Jennifer Kingsley dialled the digits with a calmness that she found surprising, then listened to the series of clicks announcing the connection. A brisk switchboard-girl replied.

'Hello?' To her annoyance Jennifer's voice trembled. She began again, more firmly. 'Hallo, is Mr Brian Hammond in the hotel, please? It's urgent.'

'One moment please . . . I'm ringing his room for you. . . .'

Almost at once the receiver was picked up and with his usual efficiency Brian was giving his room number.

'Brian? Brian, it's Jennifer. I—'

'Hello, Jenny! This is a surprise,' Brian said. 'Something wrong at—?'

'Brian, I'm sorry to interrupt your holiday but this is important,' Jennifer cut in. 'Something's happened . . . Your mother—'

'She's not ill again?'

'I'm afraid so. Edward thinks it's another heart attack. We'd just come back from holiday, Edward and me, and she was lying on the floor.' As she told him, the picture re-formed in her mind. She and Edward coming into his mother's house, hand in hand, laughing, like teenagers. . . . It had felt so good, as if they were being handed the chance to begin life all over again. They had spent a wonderful week together, away from all the stresses of the transport depot and the boardroom and Mrs Hammond's unyielding disapproval of Jennifer. It was like having a million pounds in the bank, a fund of happiness and certainty they could draw on for ever.

They had actually been on their way indoors to confront Mrs Hammond with their news – that they'd admitted they were in love and were going to be married. Oh, sure, Jennifer had had butterflies in the stomach – any prospective daughter-in-law was entitled to some when about to be taken into the

presence of a mother as formidable as Mary Hammond. But in Jennifer's case the butterflies were turned into dragonflies by the fact that her mother-in-law was the widow of the man who, until his death, had been Jennifer's lover.

Mary Hammond was never going to forgive Jennifer for that. Already she'd prevented Edward from offering Jennifer an engagement ring by the brisk expedient of flying back from the Bahamas last year and demanding a welcome-home party on the very evening her son had the ring in his pocket. She was an expert at building barricades of disapproval, hurt feelings, financial and moral debts, and even her own ill-health.

This heart attack, for instance. . . . Of course it was wicked to think she'd done it on purpose, but all the same. . . . Had Mary Hammond guessed what the situation would be between Edward and Jennifer on their return from this country holiday? Was her collapse some kind of weapon being used to bludgeon Edward into submission?

If so, it had succeeded perfectly. When they came into the conservatory and found that still figure among the toppled plants and broken pots, Edward had forgotten Jennifer's existence except as an extra pair of hands, a messenger, a first-aider, a biddable servant. 'Fetch a blanket. Ring for an ambulance. See if she's breathing. . . .' And later, as he got into his car to follow the ambulance to the hospital: 'Look, could you ring David and Brian and tell them what's happened? Brian's hotel number is at the back of this diary somewhere.'

Brian was saying now: 'How bad is it, Jenny?' His tone was calm but anxious.

'Pretty bad. At first we thought she wasn't breathing, but then we. . . . Well, anyway, she's been rushed to hospital, the South London General. Edward's gone with her.'

'David? Does he know?'

'I'm just going to ring him now, Brian.'

'Right. I'll come back at once—'

'Oh, Brian, do you think you ought? After all, Ann's been so unwell—'

'She's much better. The holiday's done her a world of good. We should get home some time tonight, Jennifer. See you then.'

Brian put the phone down on the bedside table then almost immediately picked it up again. 'Switchboard? Would you give me Reception?' During the momentary pause he surveyed the parcels and packages on the bed, the result of his wife's shopping expedition of this morning. Ann wouldn't be at all sorry to cut the holiday short; the resources of this pretty little seaside town had soon been exhausted once she began to feel more herself and had grown tired of merely lolling, eyes hidden by dark glasses, in a beach chair. She'd now been in every boutique in the High Street, tried out the hotel's hairdressing salon, grown tired of the *specialité de la maison*, and was showing signs of the restlessness that was so much a part of her character these days.

She came in as he was asking Reception to have his bill ready in half an hour.

'What's that in aid of?' she asked, surprised but with a spark of eagerness suddenly coming into her dark eyes.

'Mother's had another heart attack.'

'Oh *no*.' Whether the words held concern or impatience it was difficult to say. Then she added quickly, 'So we're going back to London?'

'As soon as we can make it.'

'I'll pack. You go down and see to the car.'

He was pleased by her quick co-operation. All at once she even looked more herself. That silly accident with the sleeping pills had pulled her down terribly, but rest and quiet had done wonders for her. He gave her a grateful smile as he hurried off to get the car out of the hotel garage.

Ann didn't move for a moment after he'd gone. She had the strangest feeling, as if Fate had leaned down from behind a dark thundercloud and said in her ear: 'All right, so you want to get back to London? I'll arrange it.' For days Ann had been racking her brains for a reason that would convince Brian it was a good idea to go home – and now, like one of those two-edged utterances by the Delphic oracle, had come this summons to return because of Mrs Hammond's illness.

As she stood now, staring into space, it wasn't the face of her mother-in-law that rose before her eyes. She didn't give a damn about her mother-in-law. The face she saw was a man's

– narrow, angular, fair-skinned, the mobile mouth curved in the half-smile of appraisal that often came when he was studying her appearance. Nicholas Fox. Once she was back in London she would be near Nicholas again. Where he was now, she couldn't be sure. The trauma of her suicide attempt, the hospital treatment for the overdose, and her convalescence had caused a complete break of any contact between them. She didn't even know whether Nicholas had heard the news, or what his reaction to it had been. Pity? Remorse? Contempt? She'd had no way of finding out, stuck down here in this boring one-horse seaside town.

But once back in London things would be different. She was well again – cured of the strange desperation that had turned her thought processes into a frantic muddle. She'd be back in control. She knew her looks had returned to normal, the glow back in her skin and the sheen on her hair.

In a burst of confidence, she pulled one of the suitcases from the luggage stand by the door, threw back the lid, and began throwing into it the collection of parcels and boxes on the bed. The sooner she was packed, the sooner they'd be on the road.

By contrast Jennifer Kingsley's life seemed to have slowed to a standstill. She had been unable to get hold of Mary Hammond's youngest son but had left messages for him at Hammond Transport and at the photographic studio where his wife Jill could generally be contacted. Now she sat at Mrs Hammond's desk, looking at the telephone pad but in reality seeing her life slowly wither and die like a plane-tree leaf on a wintry pavement.

A few hours . . . that was all, a few hours, and everything was gone. The hopes and plans, the quiet sense of security that came from being loved, the eagerness for a new beginning – where were they now? And all because of one stubborn, vengeful old lady.

Jennifer didn't want to remember that moment after they'd come in, when she noticed the slight tremor of movement in Mary's fingers. For the space of two seconds she'd found herself tensed into a single wish-projection: 'Die! Die, and set him free. . . .'

But you don't let anybody die just because it would simplify your own life. You rush about and you help to save the one person whose continued existence will be like a blight over all your own plans. My God, what an irony, what a superbly cruel joke. Who was it said, 'I laugh so that I may not weep'?

She wasn't going to weep. She wasn't a one for tears. Not even when Robert died, not even then . . . By now, really, she should have got used to these occasions when sobs locked themselves in her throat and she sat dry-eyed among the ruins of her happiness. First there had been the death of Robert Hammond, and after that there had been that hideous bequest in his will that had told the entire world not only that she'd been his mistress for seventeen years, but that her daughter Barbara was his child. How they had all hated and mistrusted her as she tried to take her rightful place as co-director on the board of Hammond Transport! Oh, yes, if she could survive that, surely she could survive anything.

But when she looked back she realised that, hard though it was, it didn't compare with the pain of losing Edward. For she knew with certainty that she'd lost him for good this time. Before, when their feeling for each other was new and untested, they'd let themselves be pushed apart by a few wily moves from Edward's mother. Jennifer had been hurt and angry, and perhaps angriest of all not long ago at an act of Mary's that for once might not have been intended to harm her – the lending of a large sum of money to Jennifer's daughter. Funnily enough it was that loan and the squabbles it had caused that had brought Edward and Jennifer leaping to each other's defence and paved the way to their idyllic holiday together.

Now it was all over. The idyll had dissolved in the face of harsh reality like dew being drunk up by the morning sun. Edward would never be able to forgive himself for being off in the country looking at roses-round-the-door cottages while his mother was lying alone and ill on the floor of her conservatory. He would always wonder if he had brought on the heart attack by insisting on that holiday with Jennifer, by insisting that his mother acknowledge – or at least admit the existence of – the relationship between them. If she died he would tell himself he had killed her. If she lived he would never dare

repeat the action for fear that, this time, it would mean a fatal seizure. He was caught, poor old Edward. Poor, dear, kind, dependable Edward – caught like a squirrel in a cage.

Oh, God, Jennifer Kingsley thought drearily, why did I ever kid myself it could work? I should have known better.

Edward, as often happens in such cases, had been made to feel he was doing no good at the hospital. The registrar had told him his mother was in the intensive care unit, and that there was little he could say at the moment. 'I should be able to tell you more in a couple of hours,' he remarked as he hurried off again. So, in search of some sort of refuge, Edward headed for the one place in the world where he felt in complete control – the depot of Hammond Transport. Once there he felt sure his brain would begin to function again and the frozen feeling inside him would begin to thaw.

But when he got into his office he felt odd. He sat down at his desk. The familiar things around him should have acted as a reassurance but he had the sensation that the world was becoming empty and draining away. In a way he knew that all this was a defence mechanism: once he let himself begin to think and feel normally, the world would fill up again – with guilt and anxiety, pain and regret, problems, problems, problems.

So it was better just to sit in this emptiness and be very careful not to feel. Empty your mind and go in for a bit of transcontinental meditation ... transitional meditation ... transcendental. Hell, I'm going soft in the head, he thought, and then: Thinking about transcontinental – did they get that contract for Yugoslav pottery to go to Bournemouth? But he wasn't going to go along to Dave's office and look. If he did, he'd start functioning as a businessman again. And once the rot set in he might even begin to function like an ordinary real-life man, not a robot – and then he might quite likely bawl like a baby and make a bloody fool of himself.

When Bill Riley tapped on the door he couldn't rouse himself enough to call 'Stay out!' The door opened, Riley's head came round.

' 'Lo, Mr Hammond,' the head driver said. 'Saw the light on.... I didn't know you were back?'

'Yes, well . . . something cropped up.'

Riley came in. It was a standing rule that anyone could walk into Ted Hammond's office any time, just as it had been with his father before him.

'I just wanted to give you this cheque,' he said, taking out his wallet. 'Been carrying it around for days.'

'What cheque?' said Edward, reluctantly half-turning to look at him.

'The fifteen hundred quid. Intended for the deposit on my new house.'

Edward was momentarily at a loss. It all seemed so long ago, that argument with Riley about handing in his notice. It had all been because, as Riley explained, his missus was being driven up the wall by the problems of coping with two noisy, lively teenagers in a rented terraced house. She wanted Riley to take a job in one of the new towns, get a spick and span new house, transport his kids away from the moral dangers of South London's discos, and make a fresh start in fresh surroundings.

The last thing Edward Hammond wanted was to lose his invaluable head driver. The simple solution was to provide him with an interest-free loan to buy a house in a better neighbourhood.

But now here was the money being handed back.

'Why?' Edward asked. 'It's yours, Bill.'

'Pipped at the post, Mr Hammond. Somebody else got the house we were after.'

'Oh? Too bad – I'm sorry.'

'Can't be helped,' Riley said in his phlegmatic way.

'Keep the money, Bill. Put it in the bank. Use it when you find another place.'

'I'd rather leave it if you don't mind, Mr Hammond. Thanks all the same.'

'Up to you, Bill,' Edward muttered. 'Up to you.'

Riley looked at him in surprise. He'd expected to be asked why, in which case he was ready with one of his sly digs about the bosses and privilege and how it was better not to be beholden, and so forth – all good trade-union handbook stuff.

But it suddenly struck him that Mr Ted didn't seem himself at all.

'Is something wrong, Mr Hammond?'

Damn you, don't ask, Edward was thinking. But it had to be acknowledged some time. 'Mother's in hospital again,' he said. 'Another heart attack. Earlier today.'

'Oh.' Riley moved from one foot to the other, rubbed his moustache with a thumb. 'Sorry to hear that. Is there anything I can do?'

'Not at the—' The phone broke into Edward's mumble of refusal. He snatched it up. 'Hammond Transport – Oh, Dave, it's you! Where the hell have you been? Jenny's been phoning all over trying to find you. . . .'

Seeing he was forgotten, Bill Riley went quietly out of the office. He drove home feeling faintly depressed. He would have been indignant to be told that he was suffering from the family-retainer syndrome but the fact was that any trouble in the Hammond family immediately affected him. He'd worked with Mr Ted's father when all he had was a couple of ex-Army lorries on day-to-day hirings, and seen the company grow and improve into the organisation of today, with a work-force comparable to the best and a fleet of vans and lorries that covered thousands of miles a week.

He'd seen Mr Ted work his way up through the company as it grew – first as a loader and checker, then as a driver – oh yes, a fair hand with a five-tonner, was Ted. Never seemed quite so happy with his life after his father passed on, Riley thought; them two brothers were a right pain in the neck but then what could you expect from grammar-school types like them? And the old lady. . . . She had a lot of good points, no denying that, but Riley wouldn't ever have cared to be married to her himself and had quite understood why Ted's father had found a bit of consolation with Miss Kingsley.

All the same, it was sad if the old lady was under the weather again. Serious, happen. Mr Ted had looked right down in the mouth.

Bill's wife came out of the kitchen at the sound of his key in the lock.

'Fancy it being you!'

'"Lo, love.' He gave her a dutiful peck on the cheek as he passed her on his way through the hall.

'You're quite early, for once,' she said with satisfaction.

'Glad to see me, are you?'

'Makes a nice change, I must say. The only explanation is you're out on strike again.'

'Hey-up,' Riley said, taking off his jacket. 'You make me sound like a militant red. Any brown ale?'

'In the sideboard. Your supper isn't ready, Bill – I've only just put it on.' She was putting his jacket on a hanger as she spoke and, watching her, he wondered how often in their married life he had watched her do just that.

He thought about it. Married nineteen years this year: five working days a week for fifty working weeks a year for nineteen years – that's a lot of jackets on hangers, he said to himself in awe. Yet she was quite a looker still, our Gwen: medium height, blonde-ish hair going a bit ash-blonde but it suited her pale, bony good looks. Her chief fault was her tongue. Not that she was a nag – wouldn't stand for that, he thought with some grimness. But by gum, she could hone the side of it to a sharp edge now and again. Not often, but when she did, it hurt.

'Kids in to supper?' he inquired as he poured his ale.

'Oh, they've had theirs. Two sittings in this hotel, you know,' Gwen said, going into the kitchen and banging lids on pots a little to let him know how hard she worked.

Riley quenched his faint grin in the foam at the top of his tankard. After a swallow: 'Where are they? Out?'

'As usual,' his wife called.

'Where?'

'Out. That's all I get told.'

'Well, they're young.' With which tolerant judgment he sat down with his evening paper.

His wife appeared in the doorway between kitchen and sitting-room. 'You ought to speak to Ronnie about that motorbike.'

'He taken the silencer off again?' He frowned at her over the headlines.

'No. . . .' She hesitated. She wasn't really quite sure what

she was complaining about, except that her children were growing up and didn't need her any more. 'He rides it much too fast.'

'Mm,' her husband said, going back to the football article. He remembered he rode his bike faster than his mother approved when he was Ronnie's age.

'I don't suppose you even notice! Nor the fact that Sally's turning into a very pretty girl.'

'Takes after you,' he muttered, his attention on Leeds United.

'And all the boys in the neighbourhood take after *her*! It's enough to turn any girl's head.'

Riley was inclined to be rather proud of Sally on this point but it didn't seem a wise admission. 'I'll talk to them both,' he soothed.

'Ooh,' said his wife, her eyebrows going up in mock alarm, 'that'll scare the living daylights out of them, I'm sure!'

To change the subject Riley caught at the latest piece of office news. 'Mr Ted was in the office again today.'

'I thought he was on holiday.'

'No, he came back early—'

'Just like you – can't bear to be away from that depot!'

'I gave him back his cheque, Gwen.'

She looked at him, sighed, and went back to her cooking in the kitchen. 'You said you were going to,' she agreed, loud enough to continue the conversation. 'It's what you wanted to do, really.'

'No, of course not!' Riley got up and came to the doorway, the evening paper flapping unnoticed in his hand. 'I know how much you want to get away from here—'

'But you weren't happy about borrowing money from Hammonds, I could see that.'

'No, I suppose not.' He leaned against the door frame. 'I don't like being under an obligation, Gwen. I don't like being beholden. You know that.'

'I do. I should do. Well. . . .' She prodded the potatoes with a fork. 'We've been here all our married lives. A few more years won't make much difference, I suppose.'

'Something'll turn up,' Riley murmured.

She chuckled. 'Mr Micawber!'

'Perhaps if they offer me a management job again, I'll take it.'

'Yes, and perhaps pigs will fly!'

He wandered back to his chair, re-opening his paper. 'Mrs Hammond went into hospital today.'

'Why?' said Gwen, coming after him, her cooking forgotten. 'What's wrong with her?'

'Heart again, they think.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. The times we've met, I've liked her.'

Riley half-nodded, half-shrugged. 'I thought of taking some flowers, but I'm on the road the next few days—'

'Oh, I'll do that,' Gwen said. 'Poor woman. I do hope she'll be all right.'

This was considerably more concern than Ann Hammond was showing as Brian drove them towards London. Though she liked to insist that she was 'perfectly well' after her overdose, the journey was making her very tired. Brian didn't want the radio on; she presumed he felt it inappropriate to listen to Tom Jones when his mother might be dying. As to conversation, that was gruesome; Brian either worried aloud about Mrs Hammond or inquired anxiously about Ann.

When they reached home it was late. The house was dark, silent and cold. In that freakish way of British weather the temperature seemed to be almost zero although they were just back from a summer holiday. Ann, who had never liked this house, came into it with a desperate reluctance.

'It's freezing in here,' she complained.

'The heating's off. I'll switch it on at once. Why don't you get to bed, dear—'

'I'm not going upstairs until this house has warmed up a bit,' she flung at him, irritated beyond endurance by his solicitude.

Brian, if he noticed the tone, paid no attention; she could almost hear him thinking, She's tired, poor darling. . . . He began bustling about, switching on things, filling the kettle, drawing the curtains.

She crouched in front of the electric fire, hugging her thin

summer coat around her. But though physically chilled, a warm sense of returning power was surging through her. She was home again, in her own domain; she would have freedom of movement, of action, once more; Brian would go to the office every day instead of hanging round her like some clumsy nursemaid; she would be able to think and plan.

She knew she'd made crucial mistakes in handling Nicholas. He wasn't the kind of man who could be held by tears or silly scenes or suicide attempts. Quite the reverse.

This time she'd be ruled by her head, not her heart. This time she would play it oh-so-cool. But she would play it, to the end, to the applause at the final curtain, to that magical closing scene where she and Nick would walk hand in hand into a sunlit future. She'd learned a hard lesson – that though she could exist without Nick, it was not worth continuing to breathe in and out in a world where he did not play a part. She intended to get Nick back. She needed him back. What else was life for?

So far she had no plan in mind. Inspiration would come – all she had to do was be patient. Patience had never been her strong suit but that too was part of the lesson she'd learned. 'Patience, and shuffle the cards' – she would wait until the card that was thrown up was one she could play, and play to win.

Brian returned with the news that the fridge was practically empty and such bread as he'd found was stale.

'The kettle's boiled, though. Would you like a hot drink? Tea? Coffee?'

'There won't be any milk, either.'

'Only tinned.'

'Which you know I hate.'

'Well then . . . black coffee?'

'Yes, Brian, since there's obviously no alternative – black coffee.'

He went to the kitchen to take coffee mugs from the shelves. He was a bit worried about Ann. She seemed strange – tense, unsettled. Perhaps he shouldn't have dragged her back with him; really, at times he wondered at his own stupidity. Much better to have left her in that lovely little seaside town where the peace and fresh air were doing her so much good. She

would probably have preferred that . . . although she *had* been bored.

He made instant coffee, felt more cheerful when he found some biscuits in an airtight tin. He took the tray into the living-room. Ann was still soaking up warmth by the fire, like some beautiful feline animal.

'You won't mind if I ring the hospital?' he said, meaning: Now I've done what I can to make you comfortable.

'Mind? That's why we've rushed home, after all. But –' she sipped the hot coffee '– it's practically dawn. Shouldn't you wait till a more civilised hour?'

'Oh, there's always somebody. . . .' He let the words die. He'd been about to say that while Ann was recovering from the overdose he'd been around hospitals in the night hours, had seen how they continued to function.

The night sister had no information except that Mrs Hammond was as well as could be expected. Brian gave his home number and she promised to ring if there was any change – 'for the worse' was understood.

He drank coffee and gulped down some shortbread biscuits. It seemed an odd repast: what he needed was bacon and eggs, or some thick soup, but there was nothing in the larder. His fault: he should have thought to telephone Mrs Paine, the daily, to get in some supplies. He glanced at Ann, wondering if he should have a look at the tinned food in the store cupboard, but it seemed hunger wasn't troubling her. The warmth from the electric fire and the revived central heating were making her sleepy.

She looked up and discovered he was studying her.

'All right?' he inquired.

'Did you bring in my make-up case?'

'It's in the hall. I'll take the luggage upstairs in a minute.'

'Perhaps I've got cleansing milk on my dressing-table anyhow.'

He wasn't really listening. ' "As well as can be expected," they said. I think that's quite hopeful, don't you?'

'What? Oh, the hospital.' She stifled a yawn. 'She'll be all right.'

The phone rang. He leapt to it, the nameless four-o'-clock-

in-the-morning dread clutching at him. 'Brian Hammond. Who? Oh, Ted! I was afraid you were the hospital.'

Edward's voice was full of weariness. 'I've just come from there. Thought I'd just ring and see if you'd got back.'

'We've been in about half an hour. I rang and the sister said, "As well as can be expected." '

'That's what they told me.What the hell does it mean?'

'I think it's quite hopeful, don't you?'

Edward grunted. 'I thought I'd go there first thing in the morning, grab hold of a doctor, try to get something more sensible.'

'Good idea.' Brian nodded, listening as his elder brother filled him in on details. As he listened he began sorting through the telephone messages taken by Mrs Paine during their absence and tucked under the telephone on scraps torn off the pad. 'All right, then, Ted. I'll leave that to you. I'll go to the depot, shall I?'

'Yes, give David a hand. He's been managing all right without us—'

'But there's stuff piling up.'

'Bound to be. I'll come straight on from the hospital.'

'Righto. See you there.' He hung up, then went to report to Ann with the message papers in his hands. 'Ted knows no more than I do, it seems.'

'I'll buy some flowers.'

'Mm?'

'For your mother. What are the visiting hours, do you know?'

'Ann, she's unconscious. She can't have visitors.'

'But by tomorrow—?'

'She's too ill.'

Ann frowned. 'So our dramatic drive back through the night wasn't strictly necessary.' She'd forgotten for the moment how glad she was to leave.

'It's been a bit of an ordeal. I'm sorry.' To him it *had* been an ordeal. His long narrow face was drawn with fatigue and anxiety, his eyelids were dropping.

'Oh, I didn't mind really.'

'You should be resting, not dashing about in the middle of the night—'

'I've had all the rest I need, thanks. A holiday resort at the back of beyond is perhaps too restful.'

'You *have* seemed more yourself this last day or two, though.'

She nodded. 'But I've had time to think, Brian. I realised I'd been very silly and done all the wrong things.'

'You weren't well,' he soothed. 'You couldn't help it.'

'Well, it certainly didn't achieve anything except to make everybody miserable, myself included.' She smoothed her thick brown hair back from her forehead, deep in thought. 'No, people expect me to be a certain way, and that's how I shall be in future.'

Brian probably wouldn't have followed this even had his attention been on it, but he was leafing through the messages. 'Quite a few people phoned while Mrs Paine was here. Tina Langton sends you her love.'

'That boring female,' Ann muttered.

'Roger and Wendy.... That would have been about the dinner-dance at Grosvenor House.'

'I'll give them a ring.' She got up, stretched. 'I suppose I ought to have a new dress for that.'

'I thought you'd be wearing your black one?'

'Wendy's seen it twice. Besides, won't there be important and influential people—?'

'Yes, I expect so. Fine, buy something.' He was really more interested in the messages. 'The garage – probably the replacement spring, I'll drop in tomorrow. Nicholas Fox ... can't read it. Her handwriting's awful.'

Ann strolled to the stairs, splendidly casual. 'What did he want?'

'I'm trying to make it out.' He held the paper close to the table lamp. 'Conveyance? No, convenience. Will Mr Hammond phone at his convenience.'

'Nothing to say he hopes I'm feeling better?'

'No'.

'Well, I must say I think that's rather thoughtless,' she said

in a cool tone. 'He's been a guest often enough in this house, goodness knows.'

'Ann, I don't suppose he even knew you were ill.'

'No?' She looked surprised. 'You didn't mention it to him?'

'He was abroad when it happened, if you remember.' Brian was quite perturbed. He didn't want Ann taking a dislike to Nick, who was a very useful business contact.

'I thought you might have talked to him on the phone.'

'No.'

'Oh. Well, apologies to Mr Fox.' She began to climb the stairs. 'I'm going to bed, I'm exhausted.'

'That's right, you get off to sleep.'

'Bring up my case, won't you.'

'In a minute, I promise.'

She toiled on up the stairs. She really was weary. But only in body. Mentally she was sparklingly fresh and active.

Nick had rung while she was away. All the time she'd been in despair because she thought he had decided to ignore her, he had been thinking of her – at least enough to phone and leave a message.

He hadn't known she was ill. He wasn't guilty of callous neglect. Other things, yes – but not that.

There was hope. She must be careful but there was a chance to get Nick back. She reached the top of the stairs, quite shaky with the effort, quite weak and giddy.

But her heart was soaring.

CHAPTER TWO

She rose about noon. Brian had long since gone to the depot leaving a note propped against the kettle in the kitchen: 'Rang Mrs Paine. She'll shop and come to tidy up but can't make it till late afternoon. Hospital says Mother no change. Don't do too much. Love B.'

She sat down with a pot of coffee, planning her day. She'd make an appointment to have her hair and nails done, order flowers for the old lady, give Mrs Paine a load of things for the dry-cleaner's. Ring the off-licence to have some wine delivered, and Scotch, and – what else? She'd look in the drinks cabinet later.

But that was the routine workaday side of existence. The really important part was what she intended to do now. A small thing, but she was pleased with it.

She went to the phone, dialled the number of Nicholas Fox's office. When the switchboard answered she asked if Nicholas was in today.

'He is? Would you put me through to his office please?'

'Who's calling please?' chanted the operator.

'It's a personal call.'

'One moment please . . . I'm connecting you now.'

Nicholas spoke. 'Fox here.'

Ann hung up with a neat, quiet movement. Looking pleased with herself, she went upstairs to get dressed. That would keep him guessing.

She wondered if he would ring back, and when. First he had to learn that she and Brian had returned to London but that would happen quite soon because Brian would return the call noted on the message pad by Mrs Paine – he was always punctilious about such things.

Brian in fact told her next evening that he had done so. He thought he was imparting information about something else at the time. 'That clever photographer, Julie Lane – did you meet her?'

'I believe so. At the P.R. party.'

'Oh yes. Well, she's accepted an assignment in Hong Kong and gone swanning off there. Lucky girl, eh?'

Lucky Dave, Ann thought privately. Although she hadn't really been paying attention to anything but her own affairs she hadn't been able to miss the constraint and disagreements between David Hammond and his wife, and though she'd no evidence to support it Ann was sure that Julie Lane had been the cause of the trouble. Ann thought David rather foolish: if he had to play around, why do it so clumsily? Especially as Jill had all the money in the family and David would find life a lot less pleasant if she took it elsewhere. Not that that was likely. Jill seemed absolutely besotted about David.

A thought struck her. 'Does that mean any change in your advertising plans?'

'Because the photographer's left? Oh no, darling.' Brian was almost amused, and quite touched that she should show an interest.

'So Nicholas Fox will still be handling the account?'

'I expect so, for the time being. It was Nick who told me about Julie. I rang him this morning.'

So if Nick wanted to get in touch he could do so any time now. But she wouldn't let herself think about it or wait for it because that was how she'd driven herself into a breakdown before. She would keep herself busy with other things. There were plenty of odd jobs as a result of their absence at the seaside – letters to write, get-well cards to acknowledge, autumn fashions to study, a dress to buy for the Grosvenor House dinner.

Three days went by before Nick rang. She was beginning preparations for dinner, and went to the phone wiping chopped parsley from her fingers

'Ann? It's Nicholas. How are you?'

'Nicholas! I'm fine thanks. You?'

'Busy, as always. Time seems to rush by, doesn't it.'

'Yes, I've noticed that. Oh, Brian had a message to phone you, among the—He did? That's good then, you've caught up.'

'You could say so.' She could hear the puzzlement in his

voice. 'My secretary said someone called a couple of days ago – a woman's voice.'

'Oh?'

'When the call came through it got cut off. It wasn't you by any chance, Ann?'

'No, sorry. Isn't it infuriating when that happens?'

'One always wonders who it could have been.'

'Yes, a bit of a mystery. Nicholas, I must go—'

'Just one other thing, Ann. That telegram you sent.'

'Telegram?'

'The one I got in Brussels.'

'Oh, that!' She put amusement into her tone. 'I must tell you about that some time. Look, I'm terribly sorry, Nicholas, I've got someone here. D'you mind if I call you back?'

'Dear me, I apologise.' She could tell he was surprised and a little piqued. In days only recently gone by, she had lived for his phone calls. 'I'll be in my office for another hour or so, and then I'm—'

'Oh, not today, Nick. I'm rather busy. You will excuse me, won't you?'

'Of course. Goodbye, Ann.'

'Goodbye.'

She went back to the kitchen, picked up the knife, and began to chop the parsley again. She began humming to herself as she worked.

That afternoon Mary Hammond had been allowed visitors for the first time in her room in the South London General Hospital. The place was like a float in the Jersey Flower Carnival, with carnations, roses, asters, pots of chrysanthemums and African violets on every available surface. It brought a smile to her pale features when her three sons arrived, each armed with a bouquet. They looked like small boys who had been made neat and tidy for an outing.

'Hello, Mother,' Edward murmured. 'Sister said it would be all right. . . .'

'Edward. Hello.' Her voice lacked its usual strength. 'And you've brought Brian and David. . . .'

They trooped across, almost walking on tiptoe, and duti-

fully kissed her. Edward noticed that instead of her usual faint fragrance of verbena, she smelt of medicaments; she seemed smaller, too, somehow. Fragile.

'It's so good to see you all,' she whispered. Tears of weakness gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Edward made haste to cause a diversion by asking what on earth they should do with their flowers in view of the display she already had. A nurse was summoned to take them away to be put in water. The usual family question-and-answer session began. How was everyone? Ann was quite better, Jill was away on a photographic assignment. Bill Riley sent his regards. Her pot plants had been re-potted and were flourishing. Edward was having his meals cooked by the daily help. Mary in her turn said she was beginning to feel more herself again and sent messages to everyone, particularly Jill for whom she had a great affection.

As soon as they decently could, the three men rose to go. None of them felt comfortable as a hospital visitor.

'Sister said we mustn't stay long. . . .'

'They're so kind to me,' Mary murmured.

'You mustn't get overtired.'

'You haven't overtired me, you've made me feel much better.' They kissed her good-bye but as Edward was straightening she caught his sleeve. 'Could you wait for a moment, dear? There's something I want to ask you.'

Brian and David made their escape, promising to wait for him outside. Edward said with efficiency, expecting to be given an errand: 'Well, what is it you want brought from home?'

'Nothing.' She ran her tongue over dry lips. 'Could you hand me the water glass, Edward?'

He helped her to drink, thinking how little she weighed against his supporting arm.

'I wanted to ask you something,' she said as she settled back on her pillows.

'Oh?'

'Sit down, Edward.'

Frowning a little, he obeyed. There was something ominously determined about her.

'I couldn't speak to you with the others here,' she went on.

'Why not?'

She ignored that. 'Did you have a good holiday?' she inquired.

He smothered a wry grin. She might have been to death's door and back but she was still Mary Hammond, keeping her finger on the pulse of events. 'Very pleasant, thank you.'

'And Miss Kingsley?'

'I think she enjoyed herself.'

'What did you do?'

Edward began to sense that this was going to lead to something important. He wished with all his heart that he had got out of the room with Brian and Dave. 'We drove around. Stayed in pubs, looked at the scenery, that sort of thing.'

His mother didn't seem to be listening. Her eyes were fixed on some far-off vision. 'It was a strange feeling, Edward ... when it happened. I was on the floor....'

'Mother—'

'I could hardly breathe. I knew what it was, of course. And I thought, "I'm dying. My life is ending".'

'Mother, you shouldn't—'

'Please, Edward.' Her hand on the turned-back sheet made a little gesture of admonition. This was important – she had to say it. She went on: 'I couldn't move. I thought, "If I can only get to the phone," but I knew I couldn't.' She glanced at her son. 'I was very frightened, Edward.'

'Yes,' he said on an indrawn breath, 'you must have been.'

'And then ... you were there. And Miss Kingsley.'

'We'd decided to come back early,' he explained 'Thank God we did.'

'Why did you come back early? You said it was a good holiday.'

'It was. But Mother, you mustn't tire yourself out by talking any more.' The last thing he wanted was to have to explain what had been in his mind as he entered the house that day.

'Then why did you come back early if you'd been enjoying yourselves?'

Edward hadn't allowed himself to picture exactly what his future might be, but he had long ago realised that the plans

of that happy homecoming must be consigned to limbo. For his mother's sake he must take care that she wasn't upset. He couldn't tell her he'd been intending to make Jennifer Kingsley his wife; so he set himself to lie like a trooper.

'I had to pick up some papers. That's why we stopped by.'

'Papers?'

'We were on our way to the depot.'

She closed her eyes momentarily. He wondered if she was trying to recall their arrival. Had they said or done anything that would give her a clue?

'I wondered if you were bringing her to see me,' she said, 'for some particular reason.'

'No.'

'Because I don't want to see her, Edward.' Her voice was tremulous. 'Not ever.'

'I know how you feel about that, Mother.' I ought to, he thought. And it was understandable. Jennifer was, after all, the 'other woman' in a triangle whose other sides had been Mary and his father. He himself had been prepared to dislike and despise Jennifer on that account, even though he had worked alongside her at the depot for years during Robert Hammond's lifetime without friction, and certainly without suspicion.

It would have been so much better not to fall in love with Jenny. He hardly knew how it had happened. Mainly it was because she had proved an ally in the fight to keep Hammond Transport functioning in the difficult days after his father's death. The will had bequeathed the firm to the three sons and Jennifer: Jennifer and Edward were the only ones in that quartet who knew anything about the business. Brian at that time had been a partner in an accountancy practice, more inclined to sell his share of Hammond's than get involved in road transport. As for David, he'd still been a bit of a playboy, fresh from university with a second-class degree.

Despite the clashes and antagonisms, Edward had seen in Jennifer a kindred spirit. She'd loved his dead father, understood his dreams. She understood Edward too, and God knows he'd needed someone to understand him. His two brothers had taken months to shake together into a team that could run and

improve the business. Jennifer alone had tried to do what the dead man had wanted – to keep Hammond Transport's wheels turning along the high roads.

So they had become allies, then friends. He understood now that she had tried to draw the line there. He, great blundering fool that he was, had refused to see the guide lines by which she'd tried to keep their relationship on an easy path.

He wished with all his heart that he could go back to those former days, to the camaraderie in the office and the quiet warmth of friendship. Not for his own sake – God, no! He knew what it was now to be really, irrevocably in love and compared with that anything less was tepid. But for Jenny's sake, it would be better. It was his fault that she had been hurt again, it was his fault that all her careful attempts at restraint had failed. She had admitted she loved him, agreed to be his wife. Now it would all come to nothing. Because if they went on with their plans it would kill his mother.

Stifling a sigh, he got up. 'I'd better go. The others are waiting.'

'One more question, Edward.' His mother stared up at him. 'And you must promise to tell me the truth.'

'What is it, Mother?'

'Do you promise?' she insisted.

'Yes.'

But she hesitated before she spoke again. Even Mary Hammond was a little afraid of what she was doing. 'Did . . . did anything take place between you and Miss Kingsley?'

A pause. 'In what way?' Edward asked.

'Did it?'

'No.'

'Or at any time?'

He felt his lips go stiff. He couldn't go on with this. 'Mother, please. . . .'

'I want to be told,' she said, her gaze fixed on his stony face

'No,' he said.

She relaxed visibly, the thin hand on the sheet opening to release the creased cloth. 'I've been afraid to ask that question before,' she admitted. 'But when you believe you're dying,

Edward, you discover there's less to fear in life than you imagine.'

But when you've got to go on living, he thought, there's still a lot to fear. . . .

'Your mind is at rest about it now,' he said.

She wasn't listening. She was back among the ghosts of her own past. 'Miss Kingsley was your father's mistress,' she said bitterly. 'She bore his child.' Her voice was less strong. 'Once I'm dead you can do as you like. . . .'

'Mother, please don't talk like that—'

'I shan't know anything about it then,' she went on, almost in a whisper. 'But not while I'm alive, Edward.'

'Mother—'

'I've done nothing to deserve that.'

He had an impulse to make her face facts – that she was condemning him to loneliness for the sake of her own injured pride, that she herself had shown little mercy to Jennifer and should expect none now.

But someone tapped at the door and the moment was gone. Perhaps it was as well. He might have done her harm by speaking his feelings.

'See who that is, dear,' Mrs Hammond said.

It proved to be Bill Riley's wife, with a bunch of garden flowers in a big polythene bag. His mother asked her to come in, and as she took his place by the bed Edward went out. Brian and David came to join him.

'I thought she looked pretty good, considering,' said David.

Edward nodded. 'Let's get back to the depot.'

'What did she want?' Brian inquired.

Edward squared his shoulders. 'Nothing,' he said. 'Nothing important.'

They had used Edward's car. On the way back Brian and David argued a little about who should visit their mother next day, and what to take.

'She may say we're extravagant but I bet she'd be disappointed if we turned up empty-handed,' David said with affection.

'And another thing – we'd better make sure everybody visits her.'

'Oh yes, Brian, how right you are! She'll lie there, mentally checking her list for absentees. That reminds me, Edward – Jennifer's daughter.'

'What?'

'Barbara. Should we get in touch? Oddly enough Mother's very fond of Barbara.'

Edward groped in his memory, back to the time before his mother's collapse. It seemed another era. 'She was going to Canada. She and that hare-brained husband of hers.'

'When?'

He shrugged. 'I forget. Jenny did tell me. . . .'

David looked at the back of his brother's head. Was he only imagining it, or did old Ted seem down in the dumps?

'Mother's going to be all right,' he said reassuringly. 'I know it must have been an awful shock, finding her and everything, but there's nothing to worry about now.'

Edward nodded, concentrating on his driving.

'It's delayed reaction,' David said. 'You'll feel fine tomorrow.'

But he didn't. He made a date with Jennifer, because they had to talk and it was better not to put it off. She knew what was in his mind when he suggested they should go to her flat after they'd finished at the depot.

She whipped up a meal in her usual efficient, light-handed way: somehow Jenny never made a chore out of anything. He had no appetite but he ate the food so as not to hurt her feelings – though that was a laugh when you came to think of it.

Conversation had been sporadic. He could feel her glance on him when she thought he wasn't looking. Finally, as they reached the coffee stage, he worked his way round to it.

'Have you told Barbara about Mother's illness?'

'Not yet. They'll still be settling down in their new flat. There's nothing she can do really, Ted. Ottawa is a long way away.'

'That's true. But she's fond of Mother.'

Jennifer suppressed a sigh. Why was it that Mary Hammond could form a warm and genuine relationship with Barbara while remaining so icily resentful towards Barbara's mother? And why was it that her own daughter couldn't ask Jennifer

for financial help yet could accept money from Mary Hammond? In a way, though the loss went deep, Jennifer wasn't sorry that Barbara and Johnny had decided to go overseas. She always had the feeling that Mary used Barbara as some sort of a weapon against her.

'I'll write to Barbara, tell her your mother had an attack but is recovering. She is, isn't she?'

'Oh yes. Quite her old self yesterday and even more so today.'

'That's good, isn't it? They can do wonders these days,' Jennifer said tritely.

'Yes, miracles.'

A silence fell. The soft light from the table lamp put highlights in her soft hair. The clock ticked.

'Tell me what's wrong,' she said in a gentle voice.

He looked up and met her gaze squarely. He didn't attempt to evade the question.

'She asked about you,' he said.

'Me?' It surprised her. She wouldn't have expected Mary to mention her.

'If we'd had a good holiday, what we'd done, and so on.'

'I see.'

'And . . . she asked about a few other things.'

'What other things, Edward?' She leaned forward so that she could study him closely. She looked sad, expectant.

He gathered together the words he had to say, and the strength to say them.

'I denied you, Jenny.' He gave a half-shake of the head. 'The cock crowed. . . . And I denied you . . . three times.'

Their eyes were locked in a gaze of deep scrutiny. Each was reading the other like a book, in which questions and answers were set down in some secret cipher to which they alone had the key.

'It must have been very difficult for you,' she said at last.

He sighed. 'I'm a coward, Jenny.'

'No, you're a nice man, a very nice man . . . who found himself in an impossible position.'

He didn't accept the excuse she made for him.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'So am I. Oh, not because of anything you said to your mother – that was necessary. But –' she gave a wry smile '– life sometimes seems to specialise in very bad, very cruel practical jokes. I don't like practical jokes. I never have.'

In a way it would have been easier if she'd been angry. At least then the pain he had inflicted would have found some release, and he in his turn would have felt justly punished.

'I had to tell you,' he said.

'I know.'

'I'd like to think that you could forgive me.'

She hesitated. 'Edward, you're very dear to me. There's no question of "forgiving" between us – no one is to blame and there's nothing to forgive.' Her manner was grave and thoughtful, as if she had already been over the ground in her mind and could speak without distress. 'I think I knew it wasn't going to happen. Perhaps I've always known it. You know? Even when we were dreaming . . . even during that holiday. . . .'

He moved restlessly. It was too painful to be reminded of those few days of tranquillity She moved away from the table, unwilling to witness his misery.

'But certainly from the moment we came back and found your mother lying there,' she continued, steady and firm, 'I knew . . . I knew for certain.' Her voice softened imperceptibly. 'So you see you haven't told me anything I haven't already faced up to.'

She had nothing more to say. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. . . . Once the funeral rites have been spoken, the mourners can disperse. But she felt Edward's hand on her shoulder.

'Jenny, look at me.'

She shook her head, turning further from him. 'I don't want to look at you. I've always known that some time we'd have to talk about it.' Her voice shook. 'And I was going to be very calm and very sensible. Only I can't.' She felt her throat locking on a sob. 'Edward, would you go, please. . . .'

'Jenny, don't.' He wanted to take her in his arms, comfort her.

She broke away. 'Please. It's only going to get worse if you stay. And . . . there's nothing else to say. So please . . . go.'

There was a pause during which she could hear her own

breath labouring in her throat. Then footsteps and the gentle closing of the door.

She put out a hand, leaned against the table with her head bent. Seconds went by. The blur of tears went away, her vision cleared. She raised her head and looked around. She saw the familiar room.

Empty, of course. Like her life.

CHAPTER THREE

For Brian Hammond, life was going along more smoothly these days. His mother was gaining strength after a temporary relapse, and Ann seemed quite her usual self again. A pet business scheme of his began to look as if it might come to fruition: he had got in touch with one of the executives of the merchant banking firm who handled Hammond Transport's finances.

Martin Farrell's office reflected the status of the bank – wood panelling on the walls, buttoned leather armchairs, a Dutch still life behind the solid mahogany desk which, incidentally, was quite uncluttered when Brian was shown in. Farrell got up to greet him. His thin, grave face lit up with his rare smile.

'Hullo, Brian. Good to see you.'

'Sorry I'm late, Martin. You know how it is – never a taxi when you need one.'

'Quite all right,' Farrell said. 'Sit down, won't you. Did you have a good holiday?'

'Very pleasant,' Brian said, trying to recall it. All that remained in his mind was Ann hidden behind her dark glasses and lying silent on her chaise-longue. 'It was interrupted, though – my mother was taken ill.'

'I'm sorry. How is she?'

'Holding her own now. But it's been an anxious time.'

Farrell perched himself informally on the front of his desk, leaning back to pick up the one file on it. 'I've just been refreshing my memory about Hammond Transport,' he observed. 'It's quite a good picture. One or two temporary setbacks but you coped with them. On the whole a very satisfactory record over the last few years.'

Brian went pink with pleasure. Approval from a man like Farrell was more precious than rubies – and what made it more pleasant still was the feeling that he, Brian Hammond, had played a vital part in building up the record that Farrell thought so satisfactory. Who had unscrambled the mess caused

by the Australian whizzkid? Who talked them into going into Europe in a big way and opening a depot in Dover?

His accountant's mind had charted a way for the firm through the economic pitfalls of the present time. His foresight had enabled them to use Jill's money as a guarantee and then release it to her use again just as David was getting restive about it. If Jenny had really sold her shares, as she had at one time intended to do, Brian would have raised the money to buy them and made good use of the extra power they would have given him. But since Jenny in the end decided not to sell, he had turned his attention back to an even more important matter.

Martin Farrell went on: 'It's in the interest of a merchant bank to help its clients in worthwhile plans for expansion, Brian. So if you've any schemes of that kind in view, I'm sure there'll be no difficulty with any advice or assistance.'

Brian cleared his throat. 'This is slightly different. Could we regard it as exploratory and off the record?'

'Not a formal approach?'

'Not at this stage, Martin. Just a private talk between the two of us.'

'Would that mean,' Farrell said in a thoughtful tone, 'that you're acting without the knowledge and consent of your co-directors?'

An uncomfortable tinge replaced the pleasurable pink of a moment ago. Brian had already experienced Farrell's uncanny knack of getting to the nub of the matter a little too quickly. He said defensively, 'I want to present a case to my board. I need your advice before I can do that.'

Farrell put the file down at his side. 'Fair enough. I just like to know who's the angler and who's the trout, that's all.' He smiled to take the sting from the words. 'I gather I'll be able to provide some bait?'

'Possibly.'

'How?'

Brian gathered himself for the most persuasive hard-sell of his life. If Martin Farrell didn't go along with him on this it might be years before he could find another sponsor of this calibre.

'Martin, I think. . . . No, I'm convinced that it's high time

Hammond Transport secured a stock exchange quotation, and became a public company. That's what I want from you. To help us to go public.'

The other man raised his straight brows. 'Mm . . .,' he said. 'Ambitious.'

'But possible?'

'Let's consider it. You'd need to interest an issuing house who would eventually quote for you. The issuing house would wish to investigate the company, and satisfy themselves that Hammond Transport was a suitable candidate for a public quotation.' He paused, with an expectant glance towards Brian. 'You have a particular issuing house in mind?'

'I'd . . . I'd assumed we'd come to you,' Brian responded. 'Your people have been our merchant bankers for some time now.'

'We'd be glad to handle it, I'm sure.'

Brian began to glow with suppressed enthusiasm. 'Martin, what I'd really like is for you personally to join the board of Hammond Transport.'

Martin Farrell scrutinised his visitor's face with a new interest. He and Brian had a lot in common and liked each other, but today he was seeing a different facet of the man he thought he knew. It occurred to him there were depths in Brian that no one suspected.

He said with caution: 'We might very well decide we'd like a representative on your board, once you'd gone public—'

'No, I mean at once. So that you'd be there during the run-up period.'

Farrell was dubious. 'That's not usual, Brian.'

Brian was only too well aware of that, but he'd already thought the idea through. 'Look, you're not a director of the bank, are you?'

'No.' Farrell looked down. He knew, and suspected that Brian also knew, that he would never now be asked to join the board of directors. He was just a few years too old to be one of the bank's bright young men, and quite a few years too young to be an *éminence grise*. He had no regrets on this score; he himself had halted his career by a conscious choice at a time when personal grief had forced him to find personal salvation.

He was never going to reach the very top of the banking ladder; but he found the middle rungs very interesting.

Especially now, as Brian Hammond said, 'So it would be possible for you to join Hammonds.'

'With the permission of my chairman.'

'Which I'm sure he'd give.'

Farrell was less convinced. 'Sir Neville would want a compelling reason. Later, yes, when you've gone public. But I can't see why he should agree to it now while you're still a private company.'

'Your bank,' Brian suggested, 'would make a lot of money out of floating Hammonds as a public company.'

Farrell allowed himself a faint smile. 'We're in business to make money. We're not a charity.'

Brian smiled in response. 'Well, tell him Hammonds feel they need your help and guidance. You believe that in this way you can ensure the issue is handled by the bank, who thus gain valuable extra business.'

'That's rather Machiavellian! Are you in fact saying, do it my way or I'll use another bank?'

'Perhaps you can find a better way of putting it to your chairman. The point is, I do very much want your help. I know I'm asking a terrific personal favour, Martin.'

Farrell didn't gainsay this, Brian noticed. Instead he asked, 'Why? What are your reasons?'

'Well. . . . You've met my fellow-directors.'

'Once or twice. I don't know them very well.'

'They're fine. All good at their jobs. But going public is a different ball game. *I* know a little, but not enough. You, by contrast, know the game backwards. I think you're not only needed, you're essential.'

Once again Farrell smiled. 'An opinion which you haven't yet revealed to your colleagues.'

'There was no point, not until I knew if you'd agree.'

'Mm. . . .' Farrell said. 'It could be discussed, I suppose.'

'That's what we're doing – discussing.'

'No – you've proposed, I've listened. To tell the truth, Brian, I'd need to feel that more than just yourself are inter-

ested in having my services. That's what I mean by discussion – at least one more member of the board.'

'Can do!' Brian said with eagerness. 'My brother David would like to hear the matter given an airing.'

'Ah! In that case. . . .' Farrell went round his desk to examine his desk calendar. 'What sort of day and time had you in mind?'

When Brian left the bank's head offices, a date for a meeting with David had been tentatively fixed.

At about the same moment, Brian's wife was also leaving a building – a block of studio flats in Shirley Place. Ann was several stages further on in her fencing match with Nicholas Fox, and it was debatable whether she was handling the foils as skilfully as she'd intended.

She'd told Nicholas that she would return his phone call some day. Yesterday she had rung him, still playing it cool. He'd invited her for a drink, she had demurred and then enjoyed the exquisite pleasure of letting herself be persuaded.

Today she had gone by arrangement to his flat. She was lucky to get a parking meter for her car almost alongside; she put a coin in and the needle swung to the two hour point. Then, knowing full well that this was not a move in keeping with her plan to be stand-offish and level-headed, she put in another coin so that her stay could be for four hours, if she wished.

The entrance to Nick's flat was intimidating. She had to announce herself to an intercom, then at Nicholas's instruction push the door when the buzzer sounded and take the lift to the top floor. Somehow it seemed irrevocable once she was in the lift.

He met her as the lift door opened; his studio appeared to be the only one on this floor. Her heart seemed to give a heavy, un-rhythmical beat as she saw him, saw his smile of welcome.

'Is it what you expected?' he inquired as she glanced about at the few paintings on the walls, the sparse yet elegant furnishings.

'More or less. These are your work?'

He nodded. 'You remember my style.'

'Oh yes. I remember your style very well,' Ann said.

He gave her a quick glance. Steady, she told herself, don't snap at him.

He took her coat, lit her cigarette for her. 'Well,' he remarked, studying her, 'this is an unexpected pleasure.'

'Is it a pleasure?' she inquired calmly.

'That depends.'

'On whether I start getting neurotic again?'

He gave a smiling shrug.

'I shan't,' she said. 'I've run that course, and I didn't like it.'

'I must say,' he said in admiration, 'you look yourself again. Just as beautiful, just as desirable.'

'Thank you.' She knew it was true. She had dressed with care, a soft smooth dress that accentuated her figure. Her skin was flawless, and excitement had brought colour to her cheeks.

'How's Brian?' he asked.

Damn you, she thought. Aloud she said that Brian was well, though anxious about his mother's health and heavily tied up with business. 'He's out such a lot,' she murmured.

'Time must hang heavy on your hands. And I gather you're supposed to be taking things easy for a bit.'

'Oh, that . . . I'm quite all right. I admit I was a bit under the weather for a while, though.'

'That telegram you sent me—'

'I didn't realise you'd ever got it, Nicholas, until you mentioned it on the phone.'

'It reached me after some delay. I'd had to fly on to Frankfurt and found it at my Brussels hotel when I got back. I didn't quite understand it.'

'Why not?'

' "I need you",' he quoted.

'That seems reasonably clear.'

'It depends on the tone of voice, doesn't it, Ann? It could have been a charming endearment calling for no reply. On the other hand. . . .' He hesitated, and she saw that he had been troubled. 'I decided to ring your home. That mouse-like friend – what's her name? The school teacher?'

'Pamela Graham? She did rally round, I recall.'

'She never liked me, did she? I hope you don't let her rally round all the time.'

'She's gone to Jersey,' Ann said. 'Assistant headmistress at a private school.'

'A nice safe distance,' he declared. 'She hung up on me.'

Ann said nothing. She was remembering the dismal weeks of her convalescent holiday with Brian, obsessed by the need to know if Nicholas had tried to contact her. And all the time Pamela Graham had kept silent about his phone call. But, as Nicholas said. Pamela had never approved.

'I took it,' Nicholas went on, 'that you had had a happy reconciliation with Brian and intended to live happily ever after.'

'I wasn't well,' she said. 'I had too much to drink one night and accidently took too many sleeping pills. I woke up in hospital.'

She regretted the confession as soon as she had made it. She could see Nicholas ranging through all the implications and finding them distasteful. She added; 'Nothing would induce me to let that happen again. It was too unpleasant.'

Nicholas chose not to pursue the subject. 'How about a drink?' he suggested. 'Scotch?'

While she watched him pour it she was framing what she wanted to say next. She had sworn to herself that she wouldn't say it all but found herself obsessed now by the need to hear his explanation.

'While you were in Brussels I phoned you early one morning. A girl answered your room phone.'

He handed her her glass. He understood the question behind the remark. 'How early?'

'Nine, nine-thirty. I'm not sure now.'

'I wonder why she didn't tell me you were on the line.'

'I didn't say who I was. I hung up. I didn't want to disturb you.'

'Why not?' he countered, raising one eyebrow quizzically. 'The lady in question would have been one of the hotel stenographers. I often start my day by dictating notes to be typed up for use in interviews and discussions. I'm sure I mentioned that to you.'

She stared at him with desperate appeal. She knew she was

eating him up with her eyes and wished from the depth of her soul that she could disguise what she was feeling. But it was so important to her to know whether he was telling the truth. If he had taken another girl with him to Brussels, at the very time when she was almost out of her mind with longing for him, she couldn't bear it.

He met her gaze and smiled a little. 'If I wanted to lie, Ann, I could do better than that. Especially as you can check up if you like – the hotel keeps a record of secretarial services so that they can charge by the day or the hour.' He sipped. He was quite at ease, almost negligent.

'I . . . I wouldn't dream of asking the hotel, Nicholas.' Did he already know that?

'I'll send you my hotel bill, if you like. It's itemised.'

'Oh, Nick. . . .' She faltered into silence.

'Have we got everything straight now?'

'I hope so. That's why I wanted to see you.'

'With what object?'

'What?'

'Why did you want to get things straight? So that you could balance the account and draw a neat line under it?'

'It could have been that. I wasn't sure if this was going to be goodbye-forever or hullo-again.'

'Which is it?'

'Which do you think?' She was sure she'd given herself away by her agony over the girl in Brussels; there was no point in pretending any more.

He put down his glass with a little thud of impatience. 'Ann, I don't like being emotionally pressured. That's why marriage didn't work for me. If a woman creates scenes and black moods, I develop a strong urge to go elsewhere.'

'You did, didn't you,' she agreed. 'You escaped to Brussels.' It was said without rancour. She knew now that she had driven him away by her possessive demands.

He was examining her with pleasure. She was glad she'd taken so much trouble with her appearance.

'The trouble is,' he said with a sigh, 'that at your best you can give most other women a hundred yards start and still come in ahead.'

She smiled, feeling the glow of victory. 'You have a painful decision to make. You'll have to decide whether I'm worth the trouble.'

He put a hand on her wrist and gently closed it so as to hold her prisoner. 'Now that you're here,' he murmered, 'would you like to see the rest of the apartment?'

'Your workroom?' she suggested.

'And other rooms.' He pulled her towards him by her wrist until they were close, face to face. Without any haste he bent his head to kiss her.

Almost languorously she wound her arms around him and returned the kiss. After a moment she pulled away a little, smiling up at him, almost teasing.

'You want the impossible, Nick. You want a woman to make love to, who'll care about you, but who'll disappear like magic when you feel she's a nuisance. Perhaps you'll find her, but she's not me. You'll have to make up your mind.'

'I'll give it a lot of thought,' he agreed, 'some other time.'

When she came out she found her time on the meter had run out. There was a ticket in a polythene bag under the windscreen wiper. With a stifled laugh she pulled it free and stuffed it in her bag before getting into her car. She felt lightheaded.

Several stages further on in the game. . . . Was she winning or losing? It didn't seem to matter any more.

When she got home Brian was already there, in the middle of a telephone conversation.

'I'll hang up, then you ring me. Perhaps that'll clear it.' He looked up as she came in. 'Hello, darling.' He nodded at the receiver he was replacing. 'Crossed line.'

'I'm sorry I'm so late, Brian,' she said, passing him with a little affectionate wave of the hand. 'Janet insisted on going to a cinema.' Janet O'Connor was the friend with whom she was supposed to have spent the afternoon.

'Good film?'

'I realised too late I'd already been to see it with you.'

'What a shame.' The phone rang under his hand. 'Hello, Dave? Ah, that's better. Who do you suppose that irate Scottish lady was?'

'Mrs McHaggis! Well, what were you saying about the bank?' David asked.

'You remember Martin Farrell, don't you?'

'That handsome quiet chap? What about him?'

'I'd like to have a three-way dialogue—'

'You can't have a dialogue with more than two people, can you?'

'Dave, this is serious,' Brian reproved. 'Can you make it next Friday?'

'I've got the Slumbercot contract to—'

'Not office hours, Dave. I meant, in the evening. Over drinks, here at my place.'

'Oh?' said David. Brian could hear the wheels going round in his head. 'Is Ted coming?'

'No, let's keep it between ourselves.'

David didn't ask; 'Why should we?' He was always interested in Brian's ploys. Over the last six or nine months he'd seen his brother develop an unexpected skill as a negotiator, so that now he very much wanted to get some clue as to his intentions. 'Is something in the wind, Brian?'

'I'll explain when I see you tomorrow at the office. For now, I want to ring Martin Farrell and make Friday a firm date. He's already said it would suit.'

Had he, by jove, thought David as he hung up.

Ann had taken off her coat and gone to the kitchen, where she was now taking from the fridge the cold meal she'd got ready earlier. 'What happens next Friday?' she inquired.

'It's a business meeting, really,' Brian said, suddenly dubious. Ann could be quite disruptive when she got bored by business. 'It might go on a bit.'

She went past him to the dining alcove with the tray of food. 'Janet did suggest. . . .'

'What, darling?'

'She invited me for an evening. I'll make it Friday, shall I?'

'Well, fine,' her husband said, much relieved. 'If you don't mind—?' He began helping to set the table.

'No, that'll suit me very well, Brian.' She drifted away,

leaving him to put out cutlery while she began looking in his desk for her cheque book.

'Lost something?'

'I thought it was in your desk. . . .'

'What was?'

'I got a parking ticket when I came out of Janet's flat. I thought I'd write a cheque for it at once before I forget, but I can't find my cheque book.'

Brian grinned. 'Oh, well, give it to me,' he said, holding out his hand. 'I'll see to it.'

She was just about to do so – for after all he usually looked after such tedious details for her – when it dawned on her that the ticket would state where the car had been parked. She drew back.

'No, no,' she said, 'I shall attend to it myself. After all, I should pay for my own indiscretions – that's only fair.' She laughed, pleased with the play on words.

On Friday, out of some obscure sense that she owed him that much, she made a special effort to make the sitting-room pleasant for Brian's meeting. She got out the best glasses, set biscuits and sandwiches ready, made sure there was ice in case they should want it although, as she got ready to go out, Brian was opening sherry.

'I'm going now, Brian,' she called.

'All right.' He surveyed the preparations. 'I wonder if he'd prefer amontillado?'

'Who? Oh, Mr Farrell.' Ann privately thought the whole thing a bit olde-worlde. Brian would be offering his quests Madeira next. 'I'm off. By the way, there was some mail for you by the second delivery. Bills and things. I've put them on the desk.'

'Thanks. Perhaps I'll open the amontillado as well.'

'Janet was talking about taking me to some friends of hers.'

'What?' he asked vaguely.

'Friends of hers, Brian. Which means I might be rather late. I said I'd ask you first.'

'Ask me what?'

'If you'd mind that I was late-ish.'

'No, of course not.' He was taking the plastic foil off the top of the sherry bottle.

'Well, have a splendid meeting.'

How nice she was being about this, he thought. She'd made quite an effort – washed the crystal glasses specially. 'I'll wait up,' he suggested, 'to tell you how it went.'

'That would be nice,' she said in demure appreciation.

' 'Bye then. Enjoy yourself.'

She smiled and went out.

After she'd gone he set the bottles alongside the glasses, surveyed the room with appreciation, glanced at his watch. Farrell was due in about a quarter of an hour. To kill time he began glancing through his post. The bill for his daughter Carol's first tennis racket. A circular for louvre doors. The telephone account. An invitation to a charity fair.

He tossed envelopes into the wastepaper basket, then unfolded the phone bill. It was always an item of big expense because he often worked from home, so that some calls chargeable to Hammonds would appear on it. It was always necessary to check it with care.

He was standing frowning at it when the doorbell rang. He went to answer it, the telephone account still in his hand. It was Martin Farrell.

'Hello, Martin, come in.' He ushered him in. 'Let me have your coat.'

'Thank you.'

To take Farrell's coat, Brian had to put down the phone bill. 'I was just checking this,' he explained. 'The Post Office are trying to charge me for a telegram I didn't send.'

'Oh, that happens sometimes, doesn't it? I once found six mysterious phone calls to New York on my bill.'

'Really? Do sit down. That's a comfortable chair.' He went to the drinks tray. 'And what happened? Did they admit they were wrong?'

'No, they were right,' Farrell said, laughing. 'My wife was alive then and had invited a friend to stay. A three-day visit – and she rang her boy-friend twice a day.'

'In New York.'

'Exactly.'

'Well, I think in this case the Post Office is wrong.' He paused with a bottle in his hand. 'I've put sherry out, but if you'd prefer—'

'No, sherry's fine, thanks.' Farrell said no more until he was accepting his glass. 'It's your brother David we're expecting, I think you said.'

'Yes, David has quite go-ahead ideas although he has no business training.'

'He handles new business, if I remember aright.'

'Yes, and some ancillary projects. Advertising, for instance.'

'I see. He knows about your plan to go public?'

'He knows I'd like to see it happen. Ah!' as the doorbell rang. 'Here he is.'

When they were all settled David began jokingly: 'You tend to get talked about in a very anonymous kind of way, Mr Farrell. Brian refers to you at board meetings as "our financial adviser" or "our merchant banker".'

'Oh, I actually exist,' Farrell said, 'or at least I like to think I do. Strictly speaking I'm not "your merchant banker". I'm not a director – I only work for the bank.'

' "Merchant banker" has a sort of historic sound. It makes me think of galleons going to the New World, and Dick Whittington – things like that.'

'I dare say quite a few merchant companies sent out galleons. These days it tends to be trade missions or survey teams.'

'You've certainly helped Hammonds enormously,' David said. He glanced at Brian. 'I think even Ted realises that.'

'I *should* like to know,' Farrell murmured, setting his glass aside, 'when your brother Edward will figure in this project.'

Brian made a fidgety movement. 'I have a reason for doing it this way, Martin. You'll see in a moment. I want to throw this at David in your presence, to get an immediate gut reaction.' He turned to his brother. 'David, I think Martin should become a director of Hammond Transport. And I mean now, as soon as we can secure agreement.'

There was a silence. The two other men studied David, Brian with some anxiety, Farrell with cool attention.

'I like it,' David said.

Brian wasn't aware that Farrell saw the breath of relief he drew in as his gamble paid off. 'You do see all the implications, Dave?'

'That's why I like it,' David replied. He had at once recalled the stand-off that had occurred when Jennifer Kingsley had wanted to sell her shares. He and Brian had been unable to come to any agreement on who should take them over and thus have the power on the board. At present, in a crunch, Edward as chairman had a casting vote when the decision came out two against two. But with an extra director giving a board of five, Edward's casting vote would never be needed and, as the Bible says, Ichabod – the glory has departed.

Clever old Brian.

'The next question is,' said clever old Brian, 'would your people agree to your joining our board, Martin?'

Farrell nodded. 'I had a word with my chairman on a hypothetical basis. In such a situation he would raise no objection.'

'Splendid,' Brian breathed. He jumped up. 'More sherry?' As he took David's glass from him he gave him a meaningful stare, which David interpreted correctly.

'I hope that means that you yourself would want to come to us,' he said.

Farrell said neither yea or nay to this. 'Brian, from what you tell me Hammond Transport is in some respects ready to become a public company, but less so in others.'

'That's true enough.'

'That in itself is a challenge – which is always interesting.'

Brian was looking at him with attention. 'Are you thinking aloud? Is there something we should contribute?'

'If the invitation to become a director of your company were to be formally extended,' Farrell told him, 'I wouldn't rule it out. I'd rather not go further just yet.'

'Fine. That's all we could expect, at this stage.' This was for David's benefit, to warn him not to press.

David got the message. Pursuing his own thoughts, he asked Brian: 'Did you ask Jennifer here tonight?'

Brian was not best pleased at having to answer that in front of Martin Farrell.

'I considered it, Dave, but I decided it might be counter-

productive. She . . . er . . . might construe a meeting like this in the wrong way.'

As a plot against Edward, he meant. But David had reasons to think differently. He'd asked Jenny how she enjoyed her holiday with Ted and got a rather tight-lipped response, which had surprised him – because David's wife Jill, who was a sensitive girl, was convinced there was something very strong and genuine between Jenny and Ted. She had said once that she expected them to marry. Certainly the carry-on when Jenny wanted to leave the company was evidence that she was right – at least where Ted's feelings were concerned. But, if one could use such an expression in affairs of the heart, Jenny seemed to have gone off the whole idea, David thought.

'I don't know, Brian,' he ventured. 'Jenny's got her head screwed on.'

'But she might have been over-defensive about Ted, read some personal meaning into this.' He gave Farrell an apologetic glance. 'Sorry. But we do have to cope with various personal stresses on the board. Personal loyalties don't always make for rational judgments.'

'Don't apologise. It's the same on any tennis club committee,' Farrell said with understanding. 'After all, a board of directors isn't an assembly of faceless, predictable robots. It's a collection of human beings with all the usual human failings.'

David and Brian nodded agreement, completely unaware that in the eyes of this quiet man there were quite a few human failings present among the directors here assembled.

'I'm glad you understand,' Brian murmured.

Farrell said: 'Should this talk of ours come to anything—'

'I'm sure it will!'

'—I should have to know that I have the support of your board.'

'We couldn't invite you to join us otherwise,' David pointed out.

'Yes, but –' Farrell held up a thin warning finger '– a majority decision wouldn't do in this case. The invitation would have to be unanimous.'

'Unanimous?' David echoed.

'Edward Hammond and Jennifer Kingsley would have to be in agreement as well.'

David opened his mouth to say that this was not entirely likely. Brian forestalled him. 'Well, that's up to us, isn't it, Dave? Powers of persuasion!' He was in reality quite taken aback by Farrell's condition. 'Are there any specific points you'd like me to put before them, Martin?'

Farrell talked briefly about his view of a director's role; it was a sterner code than David had ever envisaged and he was rather glad no one had ever made him sign any undertaking or take any vows when he inherited his Hammond Transport shares. Evidently if you worked for a merchant bank you had to be a bit of a noble Roman. He didn't much fancy it, and he was glad when Farrell got up to go.

'I think David and I had better go into battle,' Brian said as he saw him out, 'and we'll be in touch after that.'

'Fine,' said Farrell. 'Nice to have met you again, David.'

'I hope we'll be working together very soon,' David said.

'Well, talk to your colleagues, see how they feel. Goodnight, Brian.' Farrell stepped out and walked to his car, more or less convinced that the project was never going to get off the ground. If he read the signs aright, two of the directors were still in the dark and at least one of them was not going to like the light when it dawned.

'Can you hang on for a while, Dave?' Brian asked as he returned to the living-room.

'As long as you like. No point in hurrying home – Jill's still filming in Devon.'

'Want a bite to eat?'

'Oh, I don't really. . . .'

'I'll rustle up something from the fridge. I'm hungry.' They went into the kitchen, where in short order Brian produced a creditable salad and a plate of cold cuts.

David ate for a moment in silence. 'A very instructive evening,' he mused. 'Martin Farrell's a man to be reckoned with.'

'I'm glad you took to him—'

'I didn't say that.'

'You mean you didn't?'

'Perhaps he's a bit more on your accountant-style wavelength.'

'Yes, he trained as an accountant. I must admit we do seem to understand each other easily.'

'He's a razor-sharp operator under all that quiet courtesy, isn't he?'

'Razor sharp?' Brian said, puzzled. 'Only in the sense that he's nobody's fool. He's not out for himself, if that's what you mean.'

'No, I'm sure that's true.' David couldn't quite explain how he felt about Farrell, perhaps because the feeling was particular to himself; Farrell was an example of what he ought to be aiming at. Perhaps if Farrell joined Hammonds, it might inspire him. On the other hand, perhaps not.

'You and I had to be of one mind,' Brian pointed out, 'or the whole idea was a non-starter.'

'Yes. I gathered what you were up to, Brian.'

'Up to?'

'Don't worry.' It was rather a pleasure to make his brother uncomfortable in something the same way as Farrell had disturbed David. 'I don't disagree with you . . . so far.'

Brian studied him calmly.'You've no reservations then.'

'Two.'

'What?' Brian said, jolted again.

'Jennifer and Edward.'

'Yes. . . .' There was no getting away from that.

'A unanimous invitation, that's what Martin Farrell wants. He'll stick to that.'

'Oh yes. He says exactly what he means to say.'

'Brian,' David said thoughtfully, 'with Farrell, we'd have a board of five. Ted would no longer have a casting vote.'

He wasn't surprised when Brian admitted it at once. 'That's one of the things I want to achieve. Don't you?'

'Ted's going to spot that at once. He may be slow sometimes, but he's not that dense. Why,' David asked, tapping the table for emphasis, 'should he agree to have power taken away from him?'

'He's got to,' Brian said. 'Somehow.'

David gave it some thought. 'As to Jennifer . . . I think

she'll see the merits of the proposal, but if she thinks Ted is being attacked. . . .'

'He isn't,' Brian said with great conviction. 'We must make that absolutely clear.'

'Isn't he?'

Brian made a little sound of irritation. 'Ted wants to run a one-man band, but that won't do if we're going public. Oh yes –' as David was about to interrupt '– I know there are some public companies which are virtually one-man bands, but the men concerned have a lot more stature and ability than our Ted.'

That was only too true. 'I suppose we could talk to Jennifer privately—'

'No, Dave,' Brian said. He had a sudden air of resolution. 'I think it would be best to tackle this head-on. No more behind-the-scenes meetings.' It had dawned on Brian that Farrell didn't approve of such manoeuvres. 'Let's bring it out in the open and rely on persuasion.'

David shook his head in doubt. 'Ted isn't going to be persuaded to clip his own wings, Brian.'

'No. . . .'

They ate in silence until they had cleared their plates. Brian had already switched on the percolator, and now poured mugs of coffee.

He said all at once: 'I don't think we should say that Martin Farrell insists on a unanimous decision. Let's keep that to ourselves.'

David paused with his coffee halfway to his lips. 'What good would that do?'

'It might help. If we play our hand properly.'

It came into David's mind to ask if Farrell would approve of that. But he decided not to.

Before they broke up their informal get-together they had decided to raise the suggestion of Farrell's directorship at the next board meeting of Hammond Transport, scheduled for next Tuesday afternoon.

The weather that day was somehow suitable for battle. A boisterous autumn wind was lashing the trees, bringing the leaves down in drifts of umber-brown and yellow to lie on the

London pavements. Rain flurries stung the face. Driving up from his suburban home, Brian saw a skein of duck go overhead on their way to winter feeding grounds. He felt none of the envy they would have inspired in his younger brother, who still felt from time to time that coming into an office day after day wasn't what he'd intended to do with his life.

But at least today promised some excitement. David was looking forward to the boardroom encounter. Brian could say what he liked about no attack on Ted's authority being intended; it *was* an attack, and a damned clever one. Maybe it was being done for altruistic reasons – to widen Hammond's activities, increase prestige, attract solid investment – oh yes, maybe it was altruistic. But David still smarted from the tongue-lashing he'd had from Ted after the last attempt at a palace revolution. He was human enough to want to see Ted get his come-uppance if it could be done while at the same time making improvements to the firm's structure.

The early business was rapidly dealt with. There was a bit of a block when they came to Van der Moewe, their proposed ancillaries in Europe; a pile of correspondence had to be listened to about E.E.C. regulations and the new forms that the Hammond Transport office would have to get used to filling up. Since Brian's friend Nicholas Fox had introduced Van der Moewe, the matter had in general been left to Brian to deal with. He seemed to have done it with his usual efficiency but it was damned dull, David thought.

Brian, for his part, knew just what he was doing. He knew the reputation he had with the rest of the board. Good old reliable Brian, always tending the store, always adding up and subtracting in his head and coming up with his sums correct. A dull chap, Brian, but dependable. He wanted them to be lulled by his plodding analysis of the Van der Moewe contract so that they wouldn't take too much alarm at the next item.

'That concludes my report, Mr Chairman. On the whole I think we're getting a deal from Rotterdam that we can go ahead with.'

Edward nodded. 'Agreed then that we reply to Van der Moewe's last letter in those terms?' No one disagreed. 'Next item.' He glanced at his agenda. Dam' fool thing. Would Brian

never stop his earnest investigations about going into the City? He banished any irritation from his expression as he went on; 'At Brian's request, the final part of the meeting is to be devoted to a discussion on the possibilities of turning Hammond Transport into a public company.'

'Thank you,' Brian said, glancing round the table. 'I circulated a sort of briefing sheet. I hope you all got it in time.'

He could see that the other three directors had the sheet before them. Jennifer, always a model of neatness, had hers on a clipboard with notes written in red ink in the margins.

Edward leaned back in his chair. 'Aren't we covering old ground here?'

'In what way?'

'You've raised all this before, Brian. Is there any point in going over it all again?'

Brian allowed himself to look hesitant. 'You may be right.' He looked at his younger brother. 'Dave, do you feel that?'

David had been well briefed. 'I had the impression that we decided long ago to go public one day.'

'Jenny?' Brian invited. 'Is that your impression?'

'Oh, I'm sure you'd find it in the minutes. As a long-term objective we've always had it in mind.'

'That's good,' Brian observed. 'I'm glad you pulled me up, Mr Chairman, and prevented me from going over something in detail that's already been accepted in principle.'

Edward sat forward in his chair again. 'I didn't say that,' he said, a warning light flashing in his mind. 'No formal decision has ever been taken.'

'True enough, but since only the four of us are concerned, a formal decision is itself a formality. Anyway, I take your point. I won't waste time arguing pros and cons.'

Was that my point? thought Edward. He was about to say something, but Brian was already going on.

'Jenny referred to a long-term objective, and she's right. We have to have our sights trained on the years ahead – not just next year and the year after, but long-range planning. Becoming a public company with a stock exchange quotation isn't an end in itself – but it's an essential part of our strategy for the future, something we have to do.'

'Why?' Edward asked.

Brian chose to ignore this interjection. He had mapped out his tactics and meant to stick to them. One of his aims was to move too fast for Ted, who was not famed for being light on his feet. If he could stay two moves ahead of his brother, Ted would probably never catch up in time to block the final run for the touch-line. True, in the end Ted would work it out; he was no fool. But by that time it would be too late, if Brian had got far enough down the field.

'As far as I can judge,' he resumed, 'Hammond Transport would probably satisfy the requirements of the stock exchange, but that would have to be confirmed by an investigation of the company by a suitable issuing house. What I want to propose –' he directed his words towards Jennifer more than towards Ted '– is that we take the first preliminary step in what would, after all, be a fairly lengthy process.'

'Invite an investigation, you mean?' Jennifer said.

'Yes.'

'What issuing house did you have in mind?'

'Well, our own merchant bankers would be the obvious choice: Grant, Usher and Kent.'

'They're certainly very sound,' she agreed, crossing through one of the red-ink questions she'd noted on Brian's briefing sheet.

'Martin Farrell is the man there who's handled our affairs. He knows a lot about Hammonds already, and we all know him.'

Edward had decided it was time to get the meeting back under the chairman's control.

'Brian, I asked you a question. You keep repeating that we have to go public, as if it was an article of faith. Why do we have to?'

His brother had been expecting the challenge. He met it with a faint show of impatience. 'Ted, if we're going to plod on as we are, we don't "have to". But if we're going to move into the future—'

'Go for real expansion,' David took it up, 'build ourselves into a national company, spread ourselves all over Europe—'

'Make our name a household word,' Brian added. 'Aims like

that can't be achieved by simply holding the line we already have. All right –' as Edward was about to protest '– those are big ideas for the future, I admit. Immediate advantages would be: the raising of additional capital, the gaining of prestige, advantages in finding new customers.' He was ticking them off on his fingers as he spoke. 'That applies especially to Europe. Being quoted on the stock exchange makes a lot of difference when you're approaching people in Frankfurt or Milan or Paris.'

Jennifer, he was happy to see, was nodding agreement.

'Death duties,' Brian went on, ticking off his fourth finger. 'As we are at the moment, one car crash with two of us in it could cripple this company. Then, getting public money with which to buy the shares of a director wishing to sell—'

'That's not going to arise, Brian.'

'It came up not very long ago, Ted,' he replied, carefully not looking at Jennifer. 'All right, it came to nothing, there was a change of mind.' He still didn't know how Ted had managed that. When you came to think of it, there was a lot he didn't know about Ted.

Edward said, his wide mouth firm: 'Hammonds is a family business. It always has been.'

'Not entirely family,' Jennifer pointed out.

'I regard you as one of us, Jenny. We all do.'

Jennifer couldn't help a little sting of irritation at being taken so much for granted. Moreover, when it came to 'family', Mary Hammond would certainly never agree that Jennifer was 'one of us'.

'My loyalties,' Jennifer said in a crisp tone, 'are to this company and the people in it, not to a family.'

He could see the justice of that, though he wished she hadn't said it publicly. 'All right,' he allowed, 'let me put it this way. We four control the company. Why should we lose our control to . . . outsiders?'

Brian had foreseen that protest and was ready with palliatives. 'No more than thirty-five or forty per cent of the shares need be offered to the public. We'd still control the company, Ted, but we'd gain all along the line.'

Edward looked as if he had another point, but Jennifer wan-

ted to pursue her own line. 'What aspects would this investigation cover?'

He had a typed list. 'Size, number of employees, sites and depots owned or leased, how long established, organisation, directors, profit record, assets. . . .' He allowed himself a smile. 'And probably other things I haven't thought of.'

'I see.'

'Do you have any objections, Jenny?'

'Well . . if I can give a purely personal reaction . . .?'

'Please,' he urged.

'Go on,' Edward said almost simultaneously. He knew he was holding the meeting under control by only a mere cobweb-line of authority All the initiative and drive was being shown by his brother, and truth to tell he was quite astounded at how much material Brian had got ready.

'Please let's have your view, Jenny.'

She took a second or two to collect her thoughts. It was difficult to put it all into words but perhaps it was worth a try. In a way she would be speaking for Ted's benefit, to let him know where she stood.

'We're all committed to this company,' she began. 'We run a business that moves goods from one place to another and since that's what we do, we want to do it well. Sometimes for the sake of doing it well, of keeping to schedules and standing by our employees, we give up other things.' She paused. She didn't want to make a song and dance about what they gave up. 'Anyway, this company plays a large part in my life. In fact, now that Barbara's gone abroad, it's practically all of it.'

Edward said nothing. Both Brian and David, who never put themselves out one inch for Jenny, felt a little uncomfortable. They'd been rather keen to buy her out a while ago – out of the company that was 'practically all' of her life.

'Since that's the case,' she resumed, 'I want to feel that we're doing something, going somewhere. Not just sitting where we were. There's got to be a challenge, some sort of excitement. So – yes, Brian! I think we should do as you suggest.'

Good for you, Jenny! thought Dave in astonishment. Who would have thought that such a quiet girl would have so much

spirit? But he had to keep reminding himself that Jenny was very much a case of 'still waters'. After all, she'd been his father's mistress for seventeen years, had brought up an illegitimate child single-handed while at the same time holding down a demanding job. Just because she occasionally got stars in her eyes over Ted was no reason to write her off as a soft-hearted romantic.

After a pause of surprise, Brian spoke. 'I don't think any of us are going to improve on that as a summary of the case for going public, Mr Chairman.'

Edward was momentarily at a loss. Jenny's words had struck at him hard. 'This company plays a large part in my life . . . now that Barbara's gone abroad, it's practically all of it.'

That wasn't the kind of life he had wanted for Jenny. He'd meant to give her a home, a proper home, with a man coming back to it every day after work; long quiet hours together; weekend walks; summer evenings in the garden, winter evenings by the fire; security, companionship, and that deeper ground of married life, utter compatibility.

What was left to her now seemed mere bread-and-water. If she needed the salt of a challenge, had he the right to deny it to her?

In any case, he reminded himself with the businessman's half of his brain, he was about to be outvoted: Brian, David and Jennifer were all in favour of the investigation for going public.

'Very well. It seems to be the wish of this board,' he ruled, 'that Brian should speak to Mr Farrell and get his opinion.'

'To form an opinion, Ted, he'll have to look into the company's affairs.' He glanced at David.

'I think that's implicit,' David said, on cue.

'So long as that's understood. . .?'

'Right.' Edward conceded. 'Have we completed the business on the agenda?'

'One more thing,' Brian said. It had all gone so well that he suddenly made up his mind to go for the jackpot. David hadn't been briefed beyond the point they'd now reached but he was sure he could rely on him. 'I may as well raise it now because it arises out of what we've just agreed.'

'Time's getting on,' said Edward, who had a pile of work on his desk.

'I'll be brief. When we've gone public it might very well be the case that Grant, Usher and Kent would like one of their representatives to sit on our board.'

He could almost have predicted the angry spurt of colour in Ted's face, he thought.

'*Gone* public?' his brother echoed loudly. 'We haven't even started yet.'

'I think,' Brian said, 'we should examine the case for having such a representative on the board during the run-up period. Martin Farrell would be the obvious nomination.'

There was a startled pause. Damn it, thought Dave, you shouldn't have done *that*.

Jennifer murmured, 'An extra director? With a shareholding?' The idea was so unexpected as to be almost frightening.

'No, he wouldn't get any shares, Jenny. He'd have a salary, that's all, which we'd negotiate. Something quite modest, more a token salary than anything else.'

'And a vote,' said Edward.

'Well of course, he'd be entitled to a vote, Ted.'

'That would make it a five-man board.'

'We had an extra director once before,' Brian pointed out.

'Yes, and a disaster that turned out to be!'

'Ted, Martin Farrell is a very able man from the city, not an Australian whizz kid like Carter.' None of them liked to remember how Carter had dished them.

Jenny cut in. 'Why do you think we would need Mr Farrell, Brian?'

'We don't, Jenny – it's the same as with going public. If we're content to stay as we are –' he was using her own words back at her '– we can get along without Martin. But if we're serious about this – and I gather from this afternoon's discussion we are – then we need his flair, his special knowledge, his ability, to guide us through a complicated process.'

'Will he by any chance arrive walking on the waters?' Edward inquired sardonically. 'You make it sound like the second coming.'

Jennifer gave him a glance of disapproval. Really, some-

times Ted could be very childish. 'Would a token salary be attractive to a man like him? Would he even be interested?'

'He'd still be in the employ of the bank, really, Jenny. I think that as part of his investigations he'd need to know things he could learn most easily by sitting in at board meetings, so it seems sense to me to invite him to join the board as a part-time activity and offer him a director's fees. That way we would get the benefit of his advice rather than his mere presence as a bank investigator. But –' he held up a hand in warning '– I can't promise he'd accept. He simply said he wouldn't rule it out.'

'So you've discussed it with him already,' Edward remarked in a hard voice.

'Until I'd sounded him out, Ted, I'd have had no right to float the suggestion, even.'

His elder brother took a firm grip on himself. He knew he was being out-matched, and losing his temper wasn't going to help.

'An extra director on this board weakens our control of the company,' he said.

'How?'

'If we should be divided, two against two, Martin Farrell would in effect hold the casting vote.'

'Instead of you, Ted?' David put in softly.

Brian didn't blame David for wanting to get in that thrust, but it wasn't the way to handle the situation. He said with formality: 'I hope you're not putting that forward as a serious objection, Mr Chairman? That we shouldn't make an appointment which would benefit this company because you'd lose your Chairman's casting vote?'

Dave prevented himself from giving a glance of admiration at his brother. What a fox! What a cunning old Reynard! Ted was absolutely stuck now – very neatly stuck in a corner, with Brian looking at him in a lofty, serious way that almost dared him to show himself a lesser, small-minded man. And of course Ted wouldn't.

Edward shifted his ground. 'We're talking about a man I hardly know.'

'Quite, quite. This is all tentative and provisional. I've told you – there's no guarantee Martin Farrell will accept. But

assuming that we're all satisfied he's suitable, are we agreed that we should invite him to join us?' Brian directed the question first to Jennifer. 'How about you, Jenny?'

'It seems to me,' Jennifer said in a considered tone, 'that if we're a company that seriously intends to go public, there are bound to be changes. We're entering unknown territory, at least as far as I'm concerned . . . I expect you're well up on all these things, Brian,' she added, with unexpected deference towards him

'Not as well up as all that! That's why I suggested Martin in the first place.'

'It would certainly be a good idea to have expert advice on hand. I think we should ask him.'

'Dave?' Brian queried.

'I'm in favour.'

'As I am, of course.' Brian looked in expectation at Edward.

'Well, if all three of you are of one mind,' said Edward, 'I can't stop you.'

This was the sixty-four-thousand-dollar moment. Brian almost literally held his breath before he took the next step. 'Ted, can I say something before you go any further? I don't think there should be a split vote on this. We'd be off to a bad start if one of us went on record as being against such an important and far-reaching step.'

To say nothing of the fact that Farrell would turn us down flat, thought David.

'If you were to put the motion now,' Brian went on, 'I think it would be carried anyway. Wouldn't it be in the best interests of the company if we all accepted the obvious feeling of the meeting?'

Edward hesitated. 'Well, I seem to remember making the same point myself on a previous occasion. I suppose you're right, Brian. All right, agreed. Any other business? No? Meeting's closed.'

He rose abruptly and strode away. The others were getting their papers together before leaving. Brian said: 'Jenny, I don't know whether you got all that for your minutes? Seems to me the wording as I understand it should be "Approved unanimously".'

'Righto, Brian,' Jenny agreed, relieved at not having to report all the to-and-fro of the argument. 'Thank you.'

When she had gone out of the room David gave his brother a little salute. 'Well done, lad,' he laughed.

'It went much more smoothly than I expected, I must say.'

'Positively Machiavellian!'

'Is that a criticism?' Brian said, rather put out. 'You took part.'

'Yes,' said David much more soberly. 'I did.'

'It's for the good of the company, Dave.'

'The end justifies the means.' David made for the door, doubt beginning to cloud his thoughts. 'A dubious philosophy, I've always thought.'

But as Brian followed him out he was too elated to care. He had *won*. By his own efforts, for the contributions to the discussion from David had been previously instilled by Brian. He had taken them all on single-handed, and he had won.

For Hammond Transport he foresaw a glowing future. Freed from Ted's paternalistic rule, the company could take its place in the modern transport world with no embargoes, no smalltime drawbacks. Hammond's name would be seen on trucks and lorries all over Europe, and he, Brian Hammond, would have put it there.

Edward had gone at once to the outside staircase, from the top of which he could look down into the yard. As he had hoped, Bill Riley was there supervising the parking of two big loads in front of the warehouse.

'Riley!'

'Hello!' Riley looked up. 'Did you want me?'

'A word with you.'

Riley clattered up the iron stairs. 'What is it, Mr Hammond?'

'Come and have a drink with me.'

Riley was surprised, but intrigued. Besides, a drink from the boss was worth having. He followed Edward into the empty boardroom, where crumpled paper and abandoned ballpoint pens bore witness to the board meeting. Edward poured two fingers each of Scotch without asking what Riley would like.

'A celebration?' Riley asked as he took his.

'Not exactly, no.'

'Well, whatever it is – cheers!'

'Yes,' Edward said, and sank his in one swallow. 'Bill,' he said, 'who runs this firm?'

Riley stared. 'How d'you mean?'

'Who's the gaffer?'

Don't be daft, thought Riley. Aloud he said, 'You are.'

Edward pointed. 'Four chairs at this table, Bill. Four. That way, I'm the gaffer, just about. Make it five chairs and I'm a lone voice trying to talk sense.'

'Why should it be five?' Riley demanded.

'Take my word for it, Bill. Some things I can't stop. Once I know that, there's no point in wasting time and energy trying.' He added a fifth chair at the board table.

'Are you saying—'

'Running a fleet of lorries – that's what I care about.'

'Well, it's why we're here, isn't it?' Riley agreed.

'Right. *You* understand that. You know what it's about – keeping lorries moving, keeping men in work, keeping customers happy. But some see visions, Bill.' He waved a hand to indicate the loftiness of the visions. 'Finance, shares, stock markets, men from the City. Nothing to do with lorries. . . .' He paused. 'But put six chairs there, with the right man in it, a man who thinks as I do, and we're back where we were. I'm still the gaffer.' He put a sixth chair at the table.

'Mr Hammond,' Riley said in concern, 'have you been drinking?'

Edward shook his head. 'But I may do, in a minute. Celebration, you asked. Maybe there'll be something to celebrate. Bill, my dad tried to make you Transport Manager.'

'Ah . . . years ago.'

'When I took over his chair, I offered you a seat on the board.'

'I doubt if you were serious, Mr Hammond,' Riley said.

'Well, I'm serious now, Bill. Never more serious in my life.' He looked directly at Bill Riley. 'I want you on the board of directors.'

CHAPTER FOUR

When Riley told his wife, she thought at first it was a joke.

'You and your poker-face humour,' she said in tolerant amusement. 'What would you do if I took you seriously?'

'But I want you to take me seriously, Gwen! He stood there in the boardroom pushing an empty chair in against the table and offering me the chance to fill it.'

'Then *he* was joking.'

'Never saw him more in earnest, love.' Riley shook his head, sighing. 'I dunno. It's funny it should happen after I was just telling you something'd turn up.'

'You mean . . . Bill, you really mean you could be a director of Hammonds?'

'That seems to be the size of it. It would mean a lot more money. So you see you don't have to grit your teeth for another fifteen years in this house, Gwennie – we *could* be moving out to something better.'

'Ye-es,' she murmured, still grappling with the original idea. 'A director, Bill?'

'If I accept.'

She didn't ask him if he was going to. The whole thing had a fantasy element in it that prevented her from accepting it, as yet.

Gwen had dropped into the habit of visiting old Mrs Hammond in hospital. In a way the habit had formed in the first week or ten days after her children left home, because despite all her complaints about their noisiness and thoughtlessness, she missed them desperately. Ronnie had got the place he'd been hoping for at Reading Polytechnic – not very far off, really; he could come home at weekends once he was settled; though Gwen knew enough about youngsters to admit that once he'd made friends and found his own circle at Reading, he wouldn't be back much. Her daughter Sally had seen this big change in

the family as her chance to make a move too; the firm where she worked as typist and trainee-secretary was moving to Liverpool and Sally had decided to go too. To forbid it seemed useless; in one more year Sally would be eighteen and legally free to go where she wanted. So Gwen and Bill had agreed.

After the flurry of shopping and packing for them, Gwen's life seemed to grind to a halt. Since Mary Hammond had seemed glad of her company on the two or three occasions she'd dropped in, Gwen began making it a daily occurrence. Here was someone who seemed to need her.

She told Mary the news about the offer of a directorship to Bill. Mary was astounded, though she hid it well.

'I thought it was because you'd put in a word with Mr Edward,' Gwen confessed. 'The way I've wandered on about our problems at home and everything – I thought you'd maybe given a hint that Bill would take a promotion if it was offered again.'

Mary tugged the lamb's-wool bedjacket closer against her neck. For a moment she felt chilled and neglected. 'No, I intended to, but I thought it best to leave it a while. Edward's been rather distracted these last few days. I'm delighted he's made the offer to Mr Riley of his own accord.' A directorship, she was thinking. She would never have thought of suggesting a directorship for Bill Riley. A good man, always polite to her – yet she had a feeling he saw her too clearly.

'It's nice that he's got the offer on his own merits, of course,' Gwen commented with subdued pride.

'When is he to join the board?'

'Oh, he hasn't made up his mind whether to take it, Mrs Hammond.'

Well really, Mary thought to herself, whatever next! He ought to jump at a chance like that!

'Is it the extra responsibility that worries him?'

'Oh no. Bill's got a lot of confidence in his own way.' Gwen smiled. She knew only too well that he was a man who made up his own mind. 'It's more the thought that he might become something different to what he really is.' He's a union man, she added inwardly. Not a bosses' man. Aloud she said, 'Of

course there's bound to be a lot of changes if Hammond becomes a public company.'

Mary frowned at her. 'Where did you get hold of that strange notion?'

'Why ... Mr Edward told Bill it was very much on the cards.'

It silenced Mary Hammond for a few seconds. Why had she not been kept informed? How far had this preposterous scheme gone? What was Edward thinking of, to allow such a thing to be talked of and not tell his own mother?

'It's not definite,' Gwen went on, trying to soften the blow that she had obviously dealt. 'But Bill says it could happen, and if it does it means shares would be sold to the public ...?' She looked inquiringly at the old lady, who nodded. 'In that case Mr Edward might arrange for Bill to get some.'

Mary collected her thoughts so as to question Gwen and get as much information as she could. Not that Gwen knew much. When they had talked it through and through Mary mentioned something she had had in mind before Gwen's news.

'You have some time on your hands, Mrs Riley, now that your children are leaving home?'

'More than I care to think about.'

'My doctors have been talking to me in the most tiresome way,' Mary admitted, 'about taking things very carefully when I get home. They're even trying to insist that I give up gardening!'

'Well, it's a tiring hobby. Bill does a bit – I sometimes think it's too much, on top of a day's work.'

'But other things too ... I'm not supposed to go up and down stairs. Utter nonsense, really, but at first I suppose I'd better not. I was wondering, Mrs Riley, if you would be prepared to help me? Although perhaps, if your husband is going to be on the board ...'

'Oh, I'll still be the same Gwen Riley I always was,' Gwen said cheerfully. 'What sort of help had you in mind, Mrs Hammond?'

Mary had it all ready in her head. 'I already have a daily who comes in for the rough work, you understand. What I need is more a sort of companion – someone to jump up and answer

the phone, or help me get a meal. Would you think about it, Mrs Riley? I'd consider it a great favour.'

Gwen said she would think about it, meaning she would ask Bill when the moment seemed right. But the moment never did seem right. Bill was often wrapped in thought these days.

He had good reason. Events moved on at the depot in a way that showed Mr Edward was manning the defences. Never one for subtleties, he took direct action: had a space marked out in the parking area with white lines and a sign – 'Reserved for Company Chairman'. He arrived one morning driving a new car – bigger and more imposing than the old one, not exactly a Rolls or a Bentley but the best that production-line manufacture had to offer.

He had also, though he told no one, ordered two suits in Savile Row. It was totally foreign to his nature to do such a thing and in fact he found the procedure of choosing cloths and styles and being measured exceedingly tiresome. But if he was going to have to face a merchant banker's representative, he wanted to make a good impression, a Company Chairman impression.

The day came when Martin Farrell was to present himself for a meeting. A formal invitation to join the board had been sent to him following the unanimous vote, to which his reply had been rather non-committal; he would, he said, like an opportunity to meet them all.

Farrell arrived while they were still assembling. David met him at the gates, while Brian awaited him in the boardroom. To fill in the waiting time, Brian was making yet another attempt to solve the mystery of the telegram he had never sent but was being asked to pay for.

'Look,' he said into the telephone, 'it's not convenient to me to hold on any longer.' He could hear footsteps in the passage which meant the arrival of the others was imminent. 'I gave all the details to the lady I was just speaking to. Can you find out who it was supposed to be to . . . yes . . and what the message was. I'll call you back later. Okay? Thank you.'

He was just in time to greet David and Farrell as they came in. For the sake of informality he had arranged for coffee and biscuits to be brought in so Jennifer at once sat down to pour

it when she arrived with Edward. Although introductions weren't necessary since they'd met in the past, names were murmured and hands were shaken.

'Now,' said Edward, determined to re-assert himself after his recent setback, 'according to your letter to me, Mr Farrell, you felt this meeting would be useful. In what way exactly?'

'It seemed to me we had things to discuss.'

'We have no agenda.'

'Ted,' Brian protested, 'you're being awfully formal. After all, we're all hoping that Martin will be a close colleague in the very near future.'

It was this 'all' that Martin Farrell wanted to investigate. He had insisted that the invitation from the board should be unanimous, and indeed Edward Hammond's letter had reported that unanimity. But there was a lack of cordiality in it which, taken together with Brian's approach first on his own and then with only one fellow-director, had alerted him.

'I'm simply trying to find out where we stand,' Edward said to Brian.

'I'm quite happy to establish our formal positions,' Farrell said. 'Please go on, Mr Hammond.'

'Have you accepted our invitation, or rejected it?' Edward asked point-blank.

'Neither. I regard the offer as conditional upon the second part of your letter – the decision to go ahead with turning Hammond Transport into a public company. Before—'

'We're already committed—' Brian began.

Farrell went on without allowing him to say what was in his mind yet without appearing to snub him.

'Grant, Usher and Kent would have to be satisfied that Hammond Transport Services Ltd is ready for a stock exchange quotation as a public company. I don't wish to seem brutally calculating about this, but have you thought that you could be left with an unwanted and extra director should the answer to the survey prove to be no?'

'There's for *you*!' thought Edward with some satisfaction as he saw Brian flinch at that. He felt sure that Farrell had few doubts about the outcome of any survey; all the same, the man was right to state the point.

'That being so,' he went on, 'it seems to me the investigation should be completed before your invitation is finally considered. I hope you'll bear with me on that point. I do appreciate the honour.'

'The investigation ... what does it cover?' Jennifer inquired.

'Everything, Miss Kingsley. My masters have asked me to look into the accounts although of course they would have to go to an outside firm in the end. I shall have to see the premises here and elsewhere. I need permission to ask any questions I like.'

'Could you begin today?' Brian urged.

'If you wish.'

Edward, nodding agreement, picked up the boardroom phone. 'Hello,' he said to the switchboard, 'contact Bill Riley, will you, and ask him to come up here.'

'Why Riley?' asked Brian in astonishment.

'He can show Mr Farrell round.'

Brian took his brother by the elbow to turn him away from the other occupants of the room. 'Ted, I don't think that's a good idea. You know what Riley's like.'

'Yes,' said Edward, 'I do.' Not a bit like this smooth, calm representative of the City moneybags. A plain-spoken workaday chap, that was Riley – and the sooner Farrell met him and realised road transport was a different ball-game from port-and-cigars in plushy restaurants, the sooner he'd pack up and go.

Martin Farrell was well aware of Edward's feelings as he followed Bill Riley round the depot. He didn't blame the man at all. Here was an old-established family business teetering on the brink of the biggest change it would ever experience – it was quite understandable that the chairman should be having second thoughts. What troubled Farrell was; were these Hammond's *first* thoughts? Was he basically in favour of going public and having Farrell on the board? In a phrase – was he pushed or did he fall?

It was one of those still days with a thin mist through which the sun shone like a calm, steady disc of bronze. By contrast the depot was busy. By the end of half an hour Farrell had

realised that Riley was showing him all the defects in lay-out, ground organisation, and planning, and doing it on purpose.

They turned away from a scrutiny of the inadequate loading bays. 'Suppose you show me the next thing you don't like, Mr Riley,' Farrell remarked, closing his notebook.

'I never said a word,' Riley said. But he was thinking, This one's nobody's fool.

The tour of inspection over, Riley conducted Farrell back to Edward's office. 'Come in,' Edward welcomed them. And as Riley was about to withdraw: 'You too, Bill. I'd like you to sit in. You don't mind, do you, Mr Farrell?'

As it happened, Farrell didn't mind at all. But he wondered what would have happened if he'd objected.

By and by Brian was summoned from a heavy workload, including the complex Van der Moewe contract, to join them. Farrell had raised the question of what the future held for the firm should the road haulage industry be nationalised. 'Mr Farrell's just been saying,' Edward observed, 'that you can't expect investors to put money into a company whose role is likely to vanish under state control.'

Brian had already thought of that and was prepared. 'We're quite diversified, Martin, and could be more so. We do a lot of warehousing – nothing's been said about nationalising warehouses. We could also move into air freight—'

'And there's another thing,' Bill Riley put in unexpectedly. 'We've got our own workshops. We could add to them, set up a chain across the country—'

'There are plenty of garages to do repairs—' Brian began.

'Not heavy lorry repairs. Besides, lorries have to take their place behind family saloon cars and the like. No, we've got the experience and I reckon specialised workshops'd clean up—'

'That's pretty far-fetched,' Brian protested. 'The capital investment would be enormous.'

'You could adapt existing places. Strategically situated not far from long-distance routes.'

'Interesting,' said Martin Farrell, making a note in his notebook. He eyed Riley. 'I seem to remember, in the strike situation some time ago, you played some part?'

'You mean the strike over non-union drivers? Aye.'

'The men elected Riley to speak for them,' Edward explained. 'He was the one who sat across the table from me, making demands.'

'Indeed?' Farrell said. 'And did you achieve your demands, Mr Riley?'

Riley explained about the formation of the Joint Consultative Committee which now ironed out grievances between man and management. Edward used the opportunity to add a plug for the good labour relations that resulted from close contact with the men – a contact, he implied, likely to be lost in a company that had to be run to please investors.

'My father always dealt with the men by leaving his door wide open. . . .' He waved at his office door. 'I've tried to do the same.'

'Labour relations are perhaps more complex nowadays, Mr Hammond.'

'You never spoke a truer word. But we've had no trouble since we set up the J.C.C.' He grinned. 'Bill's co-chairman – he alternates with me. And the management can watch out when he's in the chair, I can tell you.'

'Is that so?' Farrell remarked.

Edward was satisfied. He wanted Farrell to be aware of Riley, and in that he could see he had succeeded. He felt that though Brian would not have approved, for Brian didn't understand fully the importance of the Rileys of this world, Riley had been a good advertisement for Hammonds.

As Farrell was leaving he asked if someone could be appointed to show him round the depot at Dover. Edward promised to see that an escort would be available but, as he waved him off in his car, wondered whom to send. He himself was unable to spare a day away from London just at present; he'd taken one or two hours off almost every day for hospital visiting and his desk was beginning to look like a wastepaper warehouse.

Brian was the obvious choice. But for that very reason Brian was not Edward's first favourite. David was at the moment Brian's disciple and besides was supposed to be contract-

chasing with the Slumbercot firm. That left Jennifer. Jennifer he could trust.

He went along to her office to ask her assistance. 'He wants to go a week today. Can do, Jenny?'

'Yes, all right.' But she was unwilling, and he understood why.

'Sure you don't mind?' he added.

'No, of course not.'

'I know you and I had one wonderful day there, Jenny. . . .'

'We can hardly avoid visiting the company's Dover depot because we once spent a few sentimental hours there.'

It hurt him to hear her dismiss it like that. She knew as well as he did that the place had importance for them because it was there, one unexpected day of escape from the ties and cares of London, that Jennifer had told him she loved him.

'Especially since it's not important any more,' she went on with ruthless calm. 'I think we should both forget about it.'

'Jenny—'

'Does Mr Farrell intend to drive or go by train?'

'I'll check on that,' he said, giving up any attempt to cope with her in this mood. 'I'll let you know.'

'Brian could tell us,' she said, about to pick up the inter-office phone.

'Brian's gone home. We'll sort it out tomorrow.'

Brian had gone with a briefcase full of paperwork. The Van der Moewe contract needed his attention – a great thick fold of legal paper, full of sections and sub-sections, and references to E.E.C. regulations. When he got indoors he found Ann had gone out, which meant he'd have to find himself something to eat in a minute.

But not yet. There were things to attend to first. He was tired, and if he sat down to a meal he'd get too relaxed and not want to start again.

What a day it had been. Martin Farrell had made his first entrance on the scene at Hammond Transport, to a favourable reception on the whole. David of course was pre-sold on him; but Jenny seemed to like him and Bill Riley, unaccountably, seemed to respect him. Ted remained the stumbling block, but Brian hoped that as Farrell's very real abilities became more

and more clear, and more and more necessary, Ted would come round.

For the moment there was nothing more to be done on that score. He ought to settle down to the Van der Moewe papers. But first he'd clear up that maddening mystery about the telephone bill. As he dialled the number he was momentarily tempted not to bother; after all, it was a small sum. But he had the neat accountant's mind that didn't like unexplained figures – and besides, at that moment, a voice spoke at the other end and he asked to be put through.

'Oh yes, Mr Hammond,' the girl said in a brisk tone. 'I checked as you requested and I have the necessary information. The telegram's destination was Brussels.'

'Brussels?' Brian echoed, racking his brains for an occasion when he had needed to wire Brussels on business. 'Who to?'

'Nicholas Fox, Palace Hotel, sir.'

Well, that could be. Nicholas was in Brussels earlier in the summer, but Brian couldn't recall contacting him, nor any urgent reason why he'd want to contact their advertising man.

'What was the message, please?' he inquired, laying the Van der Moewe contract down and picking up a pen so as to write.

'Message was: "I need you", signed "Ann".'

A pause.

'Are you there, sir? Did you get that?' asked the girl.

'Would you . . . repeat that?' Brian said.

' "I need you", signed "Ann".'

'I see. Thank you.'

'Do you wish me to make any further enquiry on this disputed item, Mr Hammond?'

'No. No, the account was quite correct. I'm afraid it was my mistake, something I'd overlooked.'

'Oh, so that's all cleared up, sir?'

'Thank you, yes. I'm sorry to have troubled you.'

He stood for a long time by the desk after he put down the phone. The wording on the Van der Moewe contract stared up at him. Slowly the printing faded away to leave a blank white page, on which there formed the words: 'I need you – Ann.' He closed his eyes and reopened them. The Van der Moewe contract was back on the page.

Nicholas Fox, Palace Hotel, Brussels.... He remembered one morning before Ann's breakdown; the phone had rung and when he answered it the overseas operator said she had his call to Brussels. She had even repeated back to him the number she'd been asked to ring – the number of the Palace Hotel, Nicholas Fox's hotel. He'd told her it was a mistake.

Ann had said, 'He's trying to ring *you*, darling.' But when he began to put through a call in case Nicholas was trying to contact him, Ann had suddenly flared at him and he'd put down the phone.

He'd put it all down to the strange state of nerves she was in at the time. But had she been afraid that, if he checked, he would find that the call had been booked from London to Brussels, and not the other way about?

The strange state of nerves.... 'I need you....' She had gone to pieces when Nicholas Fox was abroad. She had been listless and withdrawn all through her convalescence. She only seemed to flash back into life when he said they'd have to rush back to London.

And now that she was back she seemed brimming over with energy, out almost all the time. She was out now.

Where? With whom?

Janet O'Connor. All of a sudden there were these almost daily meetings with Janet O'Connor. He could scarcely conjure up Janet's face – a nothing sort of girl, childless, married to a surveyor or estate agent; Ann had been to school with her. Why all at once were they inseparable companions?

For a moment he thought of ringing her, but realised he didn't have her number. The phone book.... But what was her husband's first name? How would he know which O'Connor was her number?

Ann had got a parking ticket the other day outside Janet's flat. The name of the street would be on the docket, and that would give him a clue to Janet's address and so to her phone number. If the parking meter had in fact been outside Janet's flat.

He rummaged in the desk but the parking ticket wasn't there. He looked in the wastepaper basket; almost empty. He went up to the bedroom to look in the wastepaper basket be-

side Ann's dressing table but there was nothing in it except a few tissues.

For a moment he decided to forget the whole thing. But then the words formed across the mirror of the dressing-table: 'I need you – Ann.'

He went downstairs again to ring Mrs Paine, the daily help. 'Mrs Paine, I'm sorry to disturb you. . . . You've had tea. . . . Good. . . . Mrs Paine, when you were emptying the wastepaper baskets, did you happen to notice the counterfoil of a parking ticket?'

'I'm afraid I didn't, Mr Hammond. Was it important?'

'Not especially, but my wife asked me to keep it for her. . . .'

'Have you looked in the dustbin, Mr Hammond? It's not due to be emptied until tomorrow.'

'I'll have a look. Thank you, Mrs Paine. Oh, and Mrs Paine—'

'Yes, sir?'

'Don't mention this to Mrs Hammond, if you don't mind. I should have been more careful.'

'Of course, Mr Hammond. Goodnight.'

When he got outside the back door he had a moment of complete revulsion. Was he really going to scrabble about in a dustbin for a scrap of paper to tell him where his wife had been one afternoon a week ago?

But he had to know. It had become imperative *to know.*

The docket was quite near the top of the rubbish, among torn-up envelopes from the basket by the desk.

Shirley Place.

He had no idea where Nicholas Fox lived, but a few seconds with the phone book gave him the answer: 8a Shirley Place, London W.12.

So now he knew. Last week's parking ticket was for a meter outside Nicholas Fox's studio.

'I need you – Ann.' Was she there now? Not with Janet, but with Nick? He stood looking at the page of the telephone directory. Nick's phone number was simply one of a column, yet it seemed to stand out with a special directness.

The bell at the other end rang for some time before it was answered. Nick said, 'Hello?'

Brian didn't speak. One hand clamped over the mouthpiece, he listened intently.

'Hello?' Nick repeated. 'Hello? Hello!' Then after a pause, in reply to someone in the room with him: 'Don't know. Can't hear a thing.'

Very faintly Brian could hear another voice speak again. Impossible to distinguish whether it was Ann's voice.

'Not as a rule, no. . . .' Nick said. Then into the mouthpiece, '*Hello.*'

'Hello, Nick,' Brian said. 'Sorry. I'd just dialled your number when someone came to my door.'

'Oh, it's you, Brian!'

'Forgive me for ringing you at home like this. If it's inconvenient—?'

'It's quite all right, it's perfectly convenient.'

'Not interrupting your meal?'

'No, I've finished dinner.'

'Good. I shouldn't like to be a nuisance. I meant to ring you at your office but it's been one of those days. . . .'

'I quite understand.'

'It was a drawback not to have your home number. I couldn't remember whether you lived in Shirley Place but I took a chance on it.'

'I must give you one of my cards,' Nicholas said. 'What was it you wanted me for, Brian?'

'The costing of our picture photography has been a little over the mark, Nick. I'd like to find out how you arrived at the total?'

'Oh yes – I meant to call you about that. I have some correspondence that will show you the photographer's expenses—'

'Can we meet to discus it?'

'I'm tied up for the next few days, I'm afraid.'

'I see. Well, it would suit me to leave it a day or two. Let's look ahead to next week. Monday?'

'Monday would suit me.'

'Fine. I'll be in touch.'

'See you Monday then.'

Nicholas put down the phone with a puzzled frown. Ann had come from the dinner table to his side, had been listening

intently to the conversation. She met Nick's eyes. There was alarm in her own.

They had just sat down to a specially cooked meal when the phone rang. She'd arrived at the studio mid-afternoon, bringing with her the ingredients for a *carbonnade flamande*, a dish she had made one of her specialities. She was not a dedicated cook, but when it was a pleasure and not a chore she could produce some wonderful results.

The *carbonnade* was one of those casseroles that take a long time to cook. She came to the kitchen about six to put the final touches to it, then set the table, and served the food. Nick had just taken one mouthful when the interruption came.

Ann couldn't believe it was coincidence that Brian had rung while she was there. She felt she must make sure she wasn't caught out, so she rang Janet O'Connor.

'Janet, has Brian phoned you, by any chance?'

'Me?' said Janet in amazement. 'Why should he phone me?'

'Oh, it's a muddle – I gave him your number in mistake for this one, where I am now. We're keeping in hourly contact, you know – his mother's in hospital.'

'Really?' said soft-hearted Janet. 'I'm sorry. Anything serious?'

'A heart attack. That's why I'm so ... Janet, you're sure there was no call? You've been in?'

'Goodness, Ann, how awful for you – I can see why you're so worried. No, honestly, dear, I've been here all the time and there's been no phone call.'

As she put the phone down Nick was watching her with his quizzical gaze. 'Is Janet the friend you're supposed to be with?'

Within herself, as the alarm receded, she felt anger. It was perilously near to farce, checking with a friend that the husband hasn't been checking. And Ann was not the woman to see herself as a figure from a farce.

Her evening was spoilt. The lovely meal she'd prepared was tasteless. She left early. After a moment of surprised argument Nick didn't try to stop her. As she drove home the thought came to her that he never argued in the face of trouble. He hated trouble. She must make sure everything stayed calm.

Brian was at his desk working on a thick legal document, a heavy book of legal reference open at his side.

'Hello, Brian,' she said as she came in – and held her breath for his reaction.

But all he said was, 'Hello, Ann,' as he turned a page of the contract and made a note. When he'd finished writing he added, 'I made some coffee just now, if you'd like some.'

She almost sighed with relief. 'Not for me. Shall I pour you another cup?'

'No thanks.'

To her own surprise she was trembling a little with reaction. 'I'm going to have a drink. How about you?'

He nodded absently. She poured whisky, now and again letting her glance flicker to him. But he was so entirely normal, buried in his work, his long thin finger following the legal phraseology in a difficult paragraph while he checked in his legal dictionary. It must have been sheer coincidence that he rang Nick while she was there.

She took his drink to him, glancing over his shoulder at what he was working on. 'Van der Moewe,' she glimpsed – the firm Nick had introduced. 'Cheers,' she said, sipping.

'Cheers,' Brian said.

'What's that you're doing?'

'It's the draft contract with the Dutch haulage firm. . . .' He half-turned as Ann moved to the settee. 'Put the television on if you like. It won't disturb me.'

She sat down lazily, her drink in her hands. 'I don't think there's anything I want to see.' A few more minutes of chat to ascertain he was as unsuspicious as he seemed to be, and then she'd escape up to bed.

He put down his pen. 'You're quite early,' he remarked.

'Yes.' Was that tinged with double-meaning?

'How's Janet?' he asked, tidying up his papers for the night.

'Oh, fine.'

'Is her husband home yet?'

Was he? She should have asked when she rang Janet. 'No, he's still showing clients round holiday homes in the Bahamas.'

'You must ask her over here some time,' Brian suggested.

Not on your life, she thought. 'Why?' she asked.

'You seem to be seeing a lot of her recently. It would only be courteous to offer her some hospitality.'

'Oh ... yes,' she said. 'I'll ask her to dinner.' But Janet would have to go abroad to join her husband, or something – easy enough to invent a reason why she couldn't come. And perhaps for the next couple of weeks she'd better invent a different excuse.

'Where did you go?' Brian asked.

'When?' she countered, momentarily at a loss.

'To eat. You went out to have a meal with Janet.'

'Oh ... a little Italian restaurant, just round the corner from her flat'

'Which one?'

'Which what?'

'Restaurant.'

She couldn't think of a single restaurant in Marylebone. 'Brian, you're not the least interested in where I've been, usually.'

'Sorry,' he said. He straightened and turned, and for the first time looked directly at his wife. 'I wondered if it was any good, that's all.'

'Yes,' she said, 'very good.'

She was worried again. There had been something in that little series of questions – like suddenly having to face a barrister in court. She was really rather careless about her subterfuges. If Brian ever took the trouble to check he could cut through them in a moment.

But was he capable of suspecting her and yet remaining so calm? No reproaches, no confrontations? More – was Brian enough of an actor to seem completely normal while he questioned her about her unfaithfulness? She was sure not; Brian was such a stick, such an organisation-man. All that really excited him was a balance sheet.

'What did you do?' she inquired, wondering if he'd been at home all the time. 'This evening, I mean.'

'Oh ... worked on this contract. Phoned Nicholas Fox. That's all.'

Mention of that name made her tense She waited, all sorts of warning bells ringing in her head.

But Brian had picked up the evening paper and was opening it as if that was the important thing of the moment.

'How was he?' she asked.

'Who? Nick?' Brian found the page he wanted, folded it. 'The same as ever, I suppose. We arranged to meet, next week at the depot. I thought I might bring him home for drinks afterwards. It must be ages since you've seen him.'

'Did you suggest that on the phone?'

'Coming for drinks? No, I thought I'd better check with you first, in case you were seeing Janet or somebody.'

She shrugged. 'He's your business acquaintance, not mine.' It came out almost sullen, almost cross. She should have kept it lighter – after all, she had no reason not to want to entertain Nick.

'You enjoy his company though, don't you?' Brian countered.

'He's quite amusing when he sets out to be.' That was better, more casual.

'Well, anyway, we'll see. It may not be convenient.'

Should she say, 'I'll be busy most evenings'? Or leave it? Better not make any kind of an issue of it. She set her glass down and rose, stretching.

'I think I'll go to bed and read for a while.' She moved to the stairs. 'Don't forget to lock up.'

'I never forget, Ann,' he said. 'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

As his wife went upstairs Brian laid aside his evening paper to watch her. One hand was on the banister, the other was lazily pushing her thick brown hair off the nape of her neck. A strange, sharp pain struck at him, as if a long thin blade were being pushed into his chest. How often he'd seen her do that, move with that drowsy grace up the stairs, and how often he had wanted her and locked up quickly so as to be with her. But she would be asleep, or have a headache, or a cold coming on, or feel too tired. . . .

Was this how a marriage ended? Not with a bang but a

whimper, not with a row but a silence, not with rejection but deceit . . .?

He must have been a fool not to see it before. The only excuse was that Hammond Transport had been going through one crisis after another – Jennifer's offer of her shares and the subsequent dealing with David, the machinery of going public, the increase of negotiations with Van der Moewe. All of these had taken up his attention. It had had to be so. If he had not given his mind to that the firm might have been in danger.

He had taken it for granted that Ann was behind him in all that. He realised now that she had been living a separate life of her own, with different aims, different urgencies. Even the sleeping pills, which he had thought were caused by his own lack of care and affection – a sort of cry of pain from a neglected wife – even that incident was because of Nicholas Fox. All of it fell into place. It was like moving a kaleidoscope – each movement brought a new pattern but every pattern had its perfect logic and the pieces that made it work were Ann and Nicholas.

This evening, with the blinkers off, he had seen the signals to which he had formerly been blind. The way she held her breath when he mentioned Nicholas Fox. The way she sought for words to fend off the simplest question. She wasn't very good at it – but that wasn't because of lack of talent; it was due to contempt. It had never occurred to her that her husband would ever question her.

She had always thought him a fool. But that didn't matter. What she thought didn't matter. It was facts that counted, facts, realities, actions. A marriage could survive a great deal and, by God, his had somehow managed to struggle on in the face of Ann's boredom and impatience with him. But this was different. She had given herself to another man. Not casually, not for a momentary thrill, but as if giving her personality and whole being and life, taking it away from Brian and her children.

It came to him in slow, bitter realisation. For months, he had been living with a shadow. The real Ann had been elsewhere – with Nicholas Fox.

But perhaps the real Brian had been elsewhere too – immersed in business matters.

'Will the real Brian Hammond please stand up?' he thought bitterly.

Yes. He would. Better late than bloody never.

CHAPTER FIVE

JENNIFER, as instructed, had shown Martin Farrell round the Hammond Transport depot at Dover. They took their time over it, for Farrell had a great many questions about both the depot and Continental haulage that made it necessary. At length, as they walked away from the cliffs from which they'd been viewing the harbour, Jennifer was telling him about their change-over from their old Continental associate to Van der Moewe.

'Oh?' Farrel said.

'You know them?'

'I've met Mr Van der Moewe,' Farrell replied. 'I know people who've dealt with his companies.'

There was a certain dryness in the manner in which he said it. Jennifer asked: 'Do you approve of our choice? He was introduced to us through someone who has no particular knowledge of the haulage business.'

Farrell tilted his head. 'On the technical level, I too have no particular knowledge. I'd have to accept your expert opinion.'

'You imply,' Jennifer said, frowning, 'that there's another level.'

'The contractual one, yes. Van der Moewe is highly acute and tough. He drives a hard bargain, employs expensive lawyers.'

Jennifer pulled her raincoat collar up. The wind on the cliffs was keen. Moreover, she'd felt a frisson of anxiety at Farrell's words. They were about to take a big step, ally themselves for years to a firm who could make or mar their Continental traffic.

'Brian's studied the draft,' she said. 'Apart from a few amendments he thinks it's a good contract.'

'Then I'm sure it is.'

But there was still that tone. . . . Strange to say, she seemed able to tune in on this man's thoughts. 'Look,' she ventured,

'I've got a copy of the draft with me in my briefcase. Would you like to see it?'

What she meant was, 'I wish you'd take a look at it.' He too was able to sense the real meaning behind the invitation. 'Gladly, if you wish,' he agreed.

'I'm sure Brian wouldn't mind.'

It wasn't Brian who was troubling her. Ever since they set off for Dover there had been this undernote of reluctance about her, and at first he'd thought it was because she had some personal dislike of him – but it wasn't that.

'We could have lunch soon,' he suggested. 'I expect you know somewhere.'

'Yes.' That faint sadness again. 'I can show you a hotel with quite a good restaurant. The other end of town, though.'

They got into his car and drove off. The great grey silhouette of the Castle attracted his eye. 'I've never been round that,' he remarked, for something to say. 'Have you?'

'Yes.'

'Perhaps you could show me, if we've got time.'

'I'd rather not, if you don't mind.' She was sorry at once when she heard her own words; they sounded ungracious.

'No, I'm sorry,' Farrell said. 'It *is* quite a climb.'

'It's not that. I'm sorry, Mr Farrell, I didn't mean to be rude.'

'That's all right.'

But it wasn't. She had no reason to be snappy with this quiet man. 'I went there once,' she murmured, 'with someone I was very close to at the time. We had a marvellous day.... But we're not close any more, so I'd prefer not to be reminded.'

She had no idea of the desolation she conveyed by her unemphatic words. Farrell glanced at her quickly; her face was sad, her eyes held a faraway look in their clear grey gaze. It came to him that they had a lot in common, he and this rather gentle woman with the lonely eyes.

'My wife and I had some favourite places,' he said, to let her know he understood. 'We went back to them many times. I prefer to avoid them now.' Then, as it dawned on him that she wouldn't see the similarity; 'My wife died some years ago.'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' she said. She turned her head. He was concentrating on his driving. For the first time she saw him as a man, not as Martin Farrell the financial brain from the merchant bank. A man capable of knowing love and loss, happiness and pain.... She felt an affinity with him. They were going to be friends. The day here in Dover seemed all at once less hurtful.

It was a day for strange encounters. Brian and Nicholas Fox were having the meeting they had arranged, in Brian's office at the depot. Nicholas had had a warning from Ann, though of what it was difficult to say; Brian was different these days somehow, aloof, cool, saying things that were commonplace on the surface yet might have an under-meaning.

'Is he providing an opportunity for you to confess?' Nicholas had asked, to which Ann had shrugged and shaken her head. Thank God, Nicholas had thought; the last thing he wanted was a Guy Fawkes bonfire complete with fireworks.

But now that he was in a conversation with Brian he understood what she meant. The man was unnerving; calm and in command of himself, but with an edge to his glance and expression that changed him from a decent, worried business man to a hawk surveying the country below him.

They'd begun with trivialities. Brian had been busy with papers when Nicholas came in with an artist's carry-folder full of new advertising gimmicks. Brian had taken a moment to accept Nicholas's outstretched hand – but he *had* been busy.

'How is your mother?' Nicholas inquired politely after the first few remarks.

'She's coming out of hospital today. Not at all pleased with the arrangements we've had to make – a downstairs bedroom made out of the breakfast room, to save her going up and down – that sort of thing. The fact that she's cross proves that she's herself again.'

'Good. Glad to hear that. Is Ann keeping well?'

'Very well, thank you.'

'Perhaps you'd give her my regards.'

Brian ignored that. 'Martin Farrell from our merchant bank is coming to us tomorrow so I'm rather busy getting things

ready for the meeting. It means, I'm afraid, I can't give you as much time as I'd hoped.'

'Well, I expect we can cover most of the ground,' Nicholas said, making to undo his folder. 'I've brought some suggestions for future possible—'

'Discussion of any future relationship between us may be superfluous,' Brian cut in.

Nicholas was shaken. The sentence had had the feel of a falling guillotine blade. He caught himself staring at Brian.

'Just a quiet word of warning, Nick,' Brian went on in a friendly tone.

'Warning about what?' Damn, he had almost stammered. But what did he mean? What level were they speaking on – business or personal?

'You've achieved a good deal,' Brian said, watching his victim with hidden pleasure. Yes, victim. He intended to hurt Nicholas Fox in the only way that would really affect him – in his business status. 'But things can change. I wouldn't take too much for granted, if I were you.'

It was interesting to watch Fox come back on to the right foot, and begin to box clever. 'I always try not to.'

'The present arrangement may not meet with everyone's approval. In which case. . . .' He paused. 'You might prefer to retire from the scene gracefully.'

Now what did he mean by that? Nicholas's brain was racing. Was he being told 'Hands off my wife'? Or what?

'All this sounds very ominous, Brian,' he said

Brian nodded. 'I thought I'd speak to you on a personal level. I'd rather *not* make it a major issue, and I hope you'll feel the same.'

'Perhaps,' said Nicholas, 'you'd better define the major issue.'

There was a silence that lasted while one might count to ten. Brian was leaning back in his chair, like the Pharaoh in some Egyptian wall-carving. Nicholas waited, trying to guess what the attack would be. His whole personality felt tilted; never in his life before had he been forced on to the defensive. He was angry: with himself for being at a loss, with Brian for

putting him there, and with Ann for causing him to underestimate his antagonist.

Brian spoke at last, briskly and crisply. 'I'm hoping that Hammonds will become a public company. We shall still need an advertising and P.R. firm, but our merchant bankers may wish to nominate another agency. Your contract with us is up for renewal soon—'

'And you may not wish to renew it?' Well, that at least was straightforward, Nicholas thought. All he'd been saying was, Don't call us, we'll call you, on a purely business matter.

But his relief was shortlived. Brian, with cool certainty, put him right off-balance with his next remark. 'In the light of what we now know,' he murmured, 'we have a different situation.'

'Point taken, Brian. I quite understand.'

Do you, thought Brian, do you indeed? 'I didn't think you'd mind too much. I imagine your . . . talents are in considerable demand,' he said. It was a signpost; if Fox had the good sense to follow its direction, everything might still remain in one piece. There was no problem in that for Fox; he could take himself off abroad, as he had done the last time things got sticky. Stand not upon the order of your going, but go – that was the message.

Brian had no illusions. What he was trying to save was a sham of a marriage. But even a sham has its value, as scene-painters and stage-managers know. Within walls of paint and canvas the play can be acted out: children can be brought up with some semblance of security, friends can be entertained, life can go on. Even the actors can gain some comfort from their ramshackle shelter. Ann was a good actress and in time might regain some enthusiasm for the role of wife and mother. She was no Madame Bovary: she was a realist, not a romantic. If Nicholas cleared out and there was nothing left but the sham marriage, she would re-learn her lines and start again. 'Darling, don't forget we're dining with the Gavelstons tonight.' 'It's time Nigel went to the orthodentist about that tooth.' 'Can we afford to go abroad this year?' – the dialogue of married life, lacking drama or intensity when compared

with the big love scenes but better than not being on-stage at all.

Brian had consciously realised many things he had always subconsciously known about his wife. One of them was that she needed a man; not a sexual partner, but an escort, a support, a defence, a picker-upper-of-dropped-gloves. If Nicholas Fox disappeared, there would only be Brian to look after the troublesome details of everyday life. Ann knew her own limitations; she would hang on to Brian because, alone, she would founder.

He would let her hang on to him. There would be no love, but there would be order, dignity, a façade of decency. He didn't want it – God, no, he wanted the marriage of the first few years when he'd had a young, ardent and responsive wife. But that was gone now, gone for good. Perhaps it was his own fault. If so, he was being justly punished for his faults and failures, for all that was left was pretence. He would pretend, if Ann would do the same. A silent bargain.

Nicholas Fox understood what he was being told, he could see that. Everything now depended upon Nicholas Fox. If by any extraordinary chance the man was actually in love with Ann – well, that was the end. But Brian didn't think Fox was in love with anyone, except himself. You only had to look at him now, catching every nuance of this conversation, pliant as a courtier and perceptive as a diplomat.

'I'll bear in mind all that you've said,' Nicholas murmured. He wondered if he dare ask whether, in the event of a discussion about advertising, Brian would argue on his side at a board meeting. But he thought better of it. If he asked the question it was just possible Brian might say: 'I'll see you in hell first.' There was something about him that was really daunting.

Refastening his folder of rough sketches, Nicholas made his escape.

That afternoon's board meeting with Martin Farrell was prefaced by a lunch. There was no shop talk during the meal. David Hammond discovered that Farrell owned a yacht and had gone ocean-sailing in her, so a lot of the conversation was

on the rival merits of sail- and power-boats. David had had a cabin cruiser but got rid of it.

'I sold it,' he confessed. 'Never seemed to have time to use the thing.'

'I sympathise,' Farrell said. 'I've been through all that myself.'

'Mind you, I do think a fellow needs outside interests,' David went on. 'No use getting bogged down in business detail all your life.' He was thinking of his two brothers. 'I thought I might take a racing driver's course, perhaps. Have a crack at track racing later on.'

Farrell shook his head. 'Each man to his own taste! I prefer silence and solitude by way of relaxation. That's why I prefer sail.' Questioned by the others, he described his ketch and some of his voyages. Only Jennifer caught the meaning in his account of a single-handed passage to the eastern end of the Mediterranean a couple of years ago during a year's leave of absence; that must have been the year after his wife's death.

They took their coffee with them to the boardroom table; it was all very informal – though when offered a liqueur Farrell said drily, to Jennifer's secret amusement: 'No thanks. I doubt if we're going to be quite *that* informal!'

To everyone's surprise, Brian found he didn't have some of the necessary documentation with him. While he went to his office to fetch it Edward started the meeting, inviting Farrell's opinion of the company after his investigation.

'I don't think Mr Farrell's finished yet,' Jennifer put in.

'So far, then,' Edward prompted.

'So far, I haven't come across anything which could disqualify Hammond Transport as a candidate for a stock exchange quotation. I have certain reservations—'

He broke off as Brian came back with his documents, thus giving David the chance to inquire: 'What are they?', meaning the reservations.

'Mostly of a technical nature which I can probably sort out with Brian.'

'Sorry,' said Brian, at a loss. 'What are we talking about?'

Edward held up a hand. 'Let Mr Farrell carry on.'

'You're in a highly competitive business,' Farrell resumed.

'You'll have to persuade investors that you can cope with the problems of steeply rising costs versus keen competition—'

'We always have.'

'But investors would want to know what they're going to get out of it.'

'They'd get a stake in a damn good company,' growled Edward.

'I'm sure,' Farrell agreed, rather taken with the intense pride in the man's voice. 'It's a question of translating your faith into acceptable figures, with an accurate growth forecast.'

David said eagerly, 'I think we can forecast much faster expansion on the Continent once our arrangement with Van der Moewe gets into full swing.'

'Oh yes,' Edward said, recollecting a point, 'Jennifer tells me you agreed to look at that contract for us.'

'Yes, that was very kind of you, Martin,' Brian said.

To Jennifer's surprise, Farrell appeared embarrassed. He cleared his throat and looked at his papers. 'It is all right, isn't it?' she asked.

Farrell gave an apologetic glance at Brian. 'I'd hoped to speak to you about it this morning.'

'Sorry. I was tied up.' Brian thought of his interview with Nicholas Fox.

'Why? Is there a snag?' David said.

'I'd rather not take up the time of the meeting. I'll speak to Brian privately.' And to Brian, 'Perhaps we could talk afterwards.'

'No, no,' Brian objected. 'If I've overlooked something . . .? I had it all vetted by our lawyers, of course.' He fished out a copy of the contract.

'Let's hear about it now,' Edward ruled. 'Go on, please, Mr Farrell.'

With reluctance Farrell uncovered his copy of the document from the pile of papers in front of him. 'The body of the contract is fine. . . .'

'Then what's the problem?'

'It concerns the Equalisation Fund,' Farrell said, addressing himself to Brian. 'The transmission of money earned by one company but paid to the other.'

'Equalisation Fund,' Brian muttered, turning pages of the contract.

'Page two of Appendix B, Brian. Clause Four.'

'Oh yes. Thank you.' Brian ran his finger down. 'Subsections c and d?' He began to read. His elder brother leaned over and read over his shoulder.

'I don't understand a word of it,' Edward admitted.

'Of course you may have some reason for finding the conversion acceptable, Brian,' Farrell said, 'that I'm not aware of.'

Brian was reading intently, a frown gathering on his brow.

'Can anyone tell me the value of the guilder?' David said, doing sums on his notepad.

'It *is* highly technical,' Farrell said.

'Then you'd better explain it,' Edward invited. He was really rather vexed. From the look on Brian's face, he'd slipped up.

'It works like this,' Farrell said. 'Hammond will collect in sterling, Van der Moewe in guilders. On any foreseeable exchange rate the arrangement would be highly favourable to Van der Moewe since the contract calls for a complicated system of equalisation pinned to the guilder as quoted against German marks or French francs, whichever is the lower on the European Currency Market. The "equalisation" would tip towards Van der Moewe.'

'But never towards Hammond Transport?' Jennifer asked, alarmed.

'I'm afraid not.'

'Are you saying,' Edward asked, his voice rising, 'that every settlement day we'd be paid less than we earned?'

'That's what he's saying, Ted,' Brian agreed.

'How much less?'

'I'm not in a position to quantify the amount, Mr Hammond,' Farrell said.

'Are you, Brian?'

'A great deal of money. It could be many thousands of pounds in the course of a year.'

Edward threw down his panatella into an ashtray. 'You're

supposed to have gone through this contract with a fine tooth-comb, Brian—'

'I know. And I—'

'Don't talk to me about lawyers. *You're* our Finance Director.' Edward tapped the contract on the table between them. 'It's *your* job to pick up this sort of thing and if you didn't know what you were doing you should have found someone else who did.'

Brian sat silent. He had no defence to offer. The mistake glared up at him from the typed page and he knew that no one was to blame but himself. He knew *why* it had happened; he'd been studying that page the night he waited for Ann to come home from Nicholas Fox's studio. The moment she came in the door, he ceased to take in what he was reading.

He felt a wave of utter defeat. Already she had diminished him by sticking horns on him. If she destroyed his ability as a businessman by taking away his powers of concentration, then he was nothing.

Farrell, who was watching him, was astounded at the effect this public exposure was having. The man looked shattered. He stepped in to his rescue.

'I ought to say, Mr Hammond, that the study of exchange rates and foreign currency these days is so specialised as to be almost esoteric.'

'No, Martin,' Brian said, his chin coming up, 'I should have seen it. All I can say is that I . . . I wasn't myself when I was studying this.'

And you're not yourself now, thought Edward, suddenly struck by the whiteness of his brother's face and the lines about his mouth.

'It's no excuse, though,' Brian went on, 'and I'm sorry.'

Farrell said, 'Well, if you'd like me to question those provisions in the contract, there's no harm done.'

And Edward, anxious to take the pressure off Brian after the first outburst of anger, added comfortingly though gruffly: 'Thank God we haven't signed yet, that's all I can say.'

A short wrangle followed, about the wording of a replacement clause. Brian, over-reacting, wanted to put in everything except the kitchen stove, but accepted an outline provided by

Farrell. Edward growled that they were to tell Van der Moewe they weren't signing unless and until the contract was amended. Farrell, smothering a grin, said he didn't think the Dutchman would be too surprised.

'You think he was simply trying it on?' David asked in some admiration.

'Well, looking after his own interests.'

Everyone expressed gratitude and Farrell disclaimed thanks, looking at his watch as if he felt he ought soon to be going. Edward hurried on; he had something of his own he wanted to get on the road.

'Mr Farrell, you said you regarded our invitation to join this board as conditional.'

'Yes, I did.'

'That gives us time for second thoughts.'

'What second thoughts?' Brian said in alarm.

'On my part.'

'You can't do that—'

'Oh yes I can.'

'The motion was passed, we all agreed—'

'Brian, your brother is perfectly entitled to think again,' Farrell intervened. 'You all are.' He turned specifically to Edward. 'Mr Hammond, I made it quite plain to Brian and David that I couldn't consider any invitation unless it was a unanimous one.'

Edward's mouth came open. 'Did you?' he murmured. Light was beginning to dawn. Those two again – Tweedledum and Tweedledee, prepared to have a battle – so long as the opponent had one hand tied behind his back. The sympathy he'd felt for Brian over his blunder evaporated in an instant.

'I had thought that was clearly understood?' Farrell said, looking from one to the other.

'Yes,' said Brian.

'Perfectly,' said David.

'I see,' said Edward.

Jennifer said nothing.

Farrell was genuinely disturbed. He had been brought up to believe, with Socrates, that men of honour and probity acted openly at all times. He wanted the situation made perfectly

plain now, since it seemed there had been a certain lack of candour somewhere.

'I'd like you to understand my position,' he said to Edward. 'I didn't seek the appointment of director. So if, on further consideration, you no longer support the idea, I shall regard the matter at an end.'

Both Brian and David made sounds of protest, but were over-ridden by Edward who, oddly enough, proved to be saying much the same thing.

'No, I don't go back on my word, Mr Farrell. I'm not withdrawing my support.' Brian looked relieved. But Edward continued: 'I'd like to put something to my colleagues. If we gain one new director, let's make it two.'

He was rather pleased with the effect. His two brothers sat as if stunned. Serves you right, he thought with private amusement. He allowed himself a peep at Farrell through the smoke as he lit a fresh cheroot. That gentleman was sitting in perfect relaxation, waiting for the others to react; he at least wasn't in any plot with Brian and David. Not a bad chap, if you had to have an outsider on the board.

'Who had you in mind?' Jennifer asked, less staggered than the others.

'Bill Riley.'

'Oh, no,' Brian said, disgusted.

'Who's in favour?' Edward said, looking round.

'This isn't a board meeting,' said David with some haste.

'Let's have a rehearsal, then.'

Brian, having got his breath back, leapt in. 'Riley is entirely wrong.'

'Why?'

With a snort of annoyance, Brian began a list of Riley's character faults. 'He's obstinate, surly, and pig-headed. He's against change. He's anti-management. And anyway –' Brian's objectivity went even further awry '– this is a transparent manoeuvre!'

Edward grinned, a rather wolfish grin. 'You'd spot one of those all right, wouldn't you!'

'You want Riley on the board to act as your poodle. A vote in your pocket! You only need one more and you've got your

casting vote again. You could block anything the rest of us want to do.'

Farrell got up quickly. He felt a great distaste for what was going on. 'I think I should leave now. I have another appointment—'

'I'd be obliged if you could stay, Mr Farrell,' Edward Hammond surprised him by saying. 'Just for a few minutes.'

Rather unwillingly Farrell sat down again. But he had some admiration for Hammond. He was a clean fighter, at least – an honest man.

'Dave?' Edward said. 'What do you think?'

David Hammond was somewhat perplexed. When he first joined the company he'd known nothing about the road haulage business and it was Bill Riley who had taught him. Bill had taken him out on the roads with the lorries, shown him how to judge the loading and securing of goods, where the best transport caffs were. . . . He was a good sort, was Bill.

So that was where he began. 'I like Bill. And he's not afraid to speak his mind, if that's being surly.' That was directed at Brian. Then he faltered a bit. 'But he's got no executive background . . . no experience. . . .'

'Exactly,' Brian said.

'Neither had you when you joined this board, Dave,' Edward rejoined.

As that was more or less what Dave had been thinking, he nodded.

'And as to experience, Riley's got a damn sight more experience of road haulage than any of us, including me.'

'Only on the nuts-and-bolts level, Ted.'

'Nuts and bolts hold things together, Brian.' He turned to Jennifer. 'How about you, Jenny?'

As was so often the case, Jennifer had been thinking while the others were arguing. She said slowly, 'I think . . . Bill Riley might have something to contribute.'

Brian had to speak what was in his mind. 'Jenny, you only have to support Ted and he can steamroller anything through!'

'But I couldn't if you were on the board, Mr Farrell,' Edward said, with a glance at him. Then he saw that there was no need to underline anything for this fellow; that calm scrut-

iny rested on them all and that calm brain assessed every remark. All at once it occurred to Edward that Martin Farrell was not only alongside him, he was probably way ahead of him. He felt suddenly like a cart-horse trying to keep up with Mill Reef.

Jenny was saying to Brian, 'If I'm asked for my opinion, Brian, I have to say what I think.'

'All right, Jenny,' Edward said. 'We're not actually deciding anything now. But suppose we were, Mr Farrell?' Tell me, he was saying. Show me where you stand. He was confident he would get the truth from Farrell, no double-talk, no eva-

Farrell said: 'If you want Mr Riley on the board you can appoint him, before the question of my appointment is finalised.'

'Yes, I think I can,' Edward agreed. He allowed a moment for that point to sink in with his brothers; Jenny in favour, Edward in favour, plus chairman's casting vote. 'But what do you think about it?'

'My opinion is unimportant.'

'Do you have one?'

'Yes.'

'I'd like to hear it.'

'Workers' representation,' Farrell said in his calm clear voice, 'is perhaps a touchy question, but in a labour-intensive industry such as this it may well assist good relations if one director has come up from the floor.'

'I wouldn't necessarily disagree with that—' Brian began.

Edward held up a hand. 'I want to hear Mr Farrell.'

Brian refused to be quelled. 'The idea of Riley is absurd!'

'Do you agree, Mr Farrell?'

Farrell allowed himself a small smile. 'I doubt if Mr Riley would be anyone's poodle. Nor do I feel one should count heads, who's got a casting vote, who'll support whom.' This was a bit of an accolade to Edward who, no matter what his eventual aim, had refrained from railroading his idea through by use of Jennifer's support and his own casting vote. 'One should examine a man's merits, what talents he'd bring to the job.'

'Which rules Riley out at once,' Brian concluded.

'I don't agree at all,' Jennifer said with indignation.

'Nor do I, Miss Kingsley.'

'Do you mean you'd support Riley, Mr Farrell?' Edward asked, surprised.

Farrell nodded. 'I've formed a considerable respect for his judgment. Yes, Mr Hammond, if this were a board meeting and I were on the board, I'd vote in favour.' He got up. 'May I go now?'

'Yes,' said Edward, quite flummoxed. 'Sorry. Thank you.'

'Thank you for a very interesting exchange of views,' Farrell said gravely, 'all of you.'

And as he went, Brian had the feeling that he had suffered a fall in the estimation of Martin Farrell. By contrast Edward felt that in Farrell he had, if not an ally, at least a fair-minded observer.

CHAPTER SIX

WHEN the Joint Consultative Committee of management and men held its meeting the following week, Edward asked for the men's reactions over the idea of Hammonds going public. Brian, less in control of himself than he should have been because of the strain under which he was living, was excessively bloody-minded, particularly to his prospective co-director, Bill Riley.

Riley was surprised. He'd no particular liking for Brian Hammond but had always thought him a decent enough chap. His reaction to Brian's bad manners was to state with considerable emphasis that, if as a result of going public Hammonds profits increased, the men would expect a bigger share of the cake.

To which Brian muttered 'Typical!'

Afterwards David said to Brian: 'Joint consultation? That was more like a pitched battle.' Edward was inclined to take the line that Brian must share the blame if the men, headed by Riley, got awkward. He went in search of Riley, asked him into his office. Riley marched in, ready for battle. To his surprise Edward offered him a chair and a cup of tea.

'What do you think of Martin Farrell?' Edward inquired.

It was the last question Riley expected. 'Not for me to say,' he mumbled.

'Two men have been asked to join the board, yourself and Mr Farrell. I want to know what each man thinks of the other.'

'Well, I've not run into his sort before. Might as well come from another planet!'

'Do you think he knows what he's about?'

Riley sighed and rubbed his chin. 'It was uncanny, in a way, how he spotted practical problems – you know, the things drivers moan about. Especially in a man that's never had to fill in a time sheet in his life.' He paused and Edward sipped his tea, watching him. 'And he sees things about people. Too much for comfort, mebbe.'

'Could you work with him?'

'Judging from today,' Riley said with a short laugh, 'there's others as wouldn't find me welcome on the board.'

'Bill, are union meetings all sweetness, reason and light?'

'Not as a rule, no,' the head driver admitted.

'You'll find the same on any board of directors. I assume you could face up to anything like that.'

'Whether I want to or not – that's the point.'

Edward repressed a sigh of exasperation. 'Bill, you asked for time to consider, but time's running out. Clear off home now, eh? Talk to your wife. But make up your mind soon. Okay?'

'Righto, Mr Hammond.'

Riley had to collect his wife from Mary Hammond's house, so instead of going home he went there, arriving much earlier than expected. Mary promptly invited him to tea, and there they all sat in her elegant living-room, eating little cakes and drinking tea out of thin cups with curly handles that Riley couldn't get his finger into.

Mary was looking better. Being at home had furthered her recovery, and with Gwen to act as a cheerful unobtrusive guardian she was prevented from doing anything too active. Riley, who noticed a lot more than he let on, saw that her fine wool dress was loose on her: she'd lost weight. But the colour suited her and she'd had her hair done. A fine-looking woman still.

She was quite *au fait* with the suggestion of the directorship. 'I know my late husband would have approved, Mr Riley. And my sons will be very disappointed if you refuse.'

'Well, mebbe not all of them,' Riley said ruefully.

'What makes you say that?'

'I don't always see eye to eye with Mr Brian, I'm afraid.'

'We all have our differences of opinion,' Mary said, patting his hand. 'I'm sure Brian respects you for speaking your mind.'

Like hell he does, thought Riley. Driving Gwen home, he gave her an expurgated version of that afternoon's row in the Joint Consultative Committee.

'I don't know why you should be bothered about Brian Hammond,' Gwen said with asperity.

'I'm not bothered. It's a question of where you belong, you see.'

'Belong? God bless the squire and his relations, and keep us in our proper stations – is that what you mean?'

'I don't and you know it!'

Gwen said, 'Turn it down if you want to, but not because you're afraid of it.'

'I'm not afraid of it. But it's a big thing, Gwen. Everything'd change. . . .' He drove in silence for a moment then added more cheerfully: 'There's one good thing, any road. We'd be sure to get more money. It means we could start looking for another house.'

'No.'

'Eh?'

'No! Directorship or no directorship, we're not moving. I'm putting my foot down about that.'

'God Almighty, woman—'

'There's no need to blaspheme,' Gwen said in disapproval, 'and kindly keep your eye on the road.'

'But *Gwennie*! You were on at me for months to get out of that house!'

'That was *then*. This is now. Everything's different. With the children gone and visiting Mrs Hammond almost every day, I don't feel so boxed in. Besides –' and Riley knew that this was the important point '– I don't want you ever saying you took the directorship to buy me a house. What good does it do me if I've got a new house, and you're not happy? It's got to be your decision about joining the board. But join or not, we stay where we are, and that's final!'

Jill, David's wife, had decided not to stay where she was. At that very moment she was looking at a very expensive penthouse flat in Knightsbridge which she intended to buy with the money which had formerly been held as a guarantee against Hammond Transport's financial credit. After a good deal of angry argument by David, the money had been released; most of it would be taken up in buying the apartment but that didn't matter. Jill had a particular reason for what she was doing; her wedding anniversary was approaching.

That same evening Ann was just going out as Brian came home. 'Where are you off to?' he asked. 'To see Janet?'

She was quite relieved to be able to answer truthfully. 'I'm going to spend the evening with your mother. She has to have someone with her and Edward has to go to some dreary evening function.'

Brian was surprised. Everyone else in the family took turns at being with his mother in the evenings but somehow Ann had always got out of it hitherto. He had intended to ask her this favour tonight, and was glad Edward had rung before he got home and asked instead. He was in no mood to ask for favours.

'Good,' he said savagely, and made for the stairs.

He was so unlike himself that she was worried.

'Brian, is something wrong?'

'Yes, very wrong.'

'What?'

It trembled on his lips: Nicholas Fox. Instead he said, 'The whole damn set-up. Edward's behaving like an utter fool.'

And as Ann didn't want to hear about the dreary problems of the dreary management of Hammonds, she put on her coat and went out.

She reached Mary's house just as Edward was going out. She never thought he looked right in evening clothes. Mary greeted her with some surprise and offered her sherry, which wasn't a drink she liked – but she knew better than to ask Mary Hammond for a whisky or a brandy. That puritanical lady held that liquor was unladylike, and wine only allowable in small measures and at set times.

They settled down in the sitting-room. It was doubtful if Mary since her illness had had a visitor as inattentive as Ann. At first, in a way, it was a relief. Everybody else kept jumping up if she so much as moved a muscle; dear Jill, for instance, would have wrapped her in a shawl and put her in a rocking-chair if she could.

So when Ann settled down in an armchair as if she was going to be there all evening, Mary was pleased. They talked about the weather, Brian, Brian's work, the children, and Ann's parents in Worthing. Then conversation died. After a

few remarks that gained monosyllabic answers, Mary gave up. An odd girl, Ann. She had never understood her.

She took up her sewing. She was doing drawn-thread work on a tablecloth for Jill. The silence lengthened.

'You can put the television on if you like, dear,' she suggested.

Ann came to herself with a start. 'No thanks. Unless there's something you'd like to see?'

'No, I don't think so.' She would have liked a Mozart record on her record-player, but it was no good asking Ann to do it. She put in a stitch or two, counted threads, and paused. The girl was so clearly bored. 'Were you asked to come over, Ann? Is there some sort of arrangement that I'm never left alone?'

'Good heavens, no,' said Ann, feeling guilty. 'I just thought it would be nice to see you, and have a chat.'

'Hm,' said Mary.

Ann laughed. 'I suppose I haven't been very chatty, though, have I.'

'Not noticeably, no.'

Another silence. Mary counted threads – four, five, six – and put in a stitch.

'Do you ever wish,' Ann said suddenly, 'that your husband had told you about Jennifer Kingsley?'

The needle went into the forefinger of Mary's left hand. Stoically she made no exclamation. 'What a very abrupt question!' she said.

Under the inquiring gaze of the older woman Ann coloured and shrugged. 'Yes, I'm sorry. Never mind.'

'Are you implying that Brian may be seeing someone else?'

The idea was so absurd that Ann nearly laughed. 'No! No, no, of course not. It was curiosity, that's all. I shouldn't have asked.'

She had been impelled to the question by the need for some sort of guideline by which to act. She and Nick had talked and talked, but neither of them had the strength of will to come to a decision. Nick had told her about his strange interview with Brian; she could tell he was still unnerved by it. She tried to get him to pinpoint what it was that he found so disturbing.

'I don't know. Everything he said was ambiguous.'

'Brian always talks like that,' she said with scorn. 'He makes reservations about reservations.'

Nick looked serious. 'I think he knows,' he said.

Ann had watched him move to the other side of the studio to pour himself a drink. He *doesn't* like it when things go wrong, she thought. She picked up her coat and put it on.

'Where are you going?' he asked in surprise.

'Just . . . going.'

'Where?'

'To make my peace with Brian.'

'Do you want to?'

'I assumed . . . you'd want me to.'

'And then what?'

'And then nothing.'

He stared at her. It was strange how uncertainty changed him.

'Perhaps I'm wrong,' he muttered. 'Perhaps he doesn't know.'

'But suppose he does?'

He didn't reply. She thought that was the end.

Then, taking her breath away, he said: 'Take that coat off.'

After a moment of hesitation she obeyed. 'I was only trying to be co-operative,' she explained. 'You didn't like me being demanding, and making scenes.'

'I don't like you walking out.'

'But you don't want emotional ties,' she said.

'I don't know what I want.'

'You'd better decide.'

'Is it all up to me?' he asked, almost with bitterness.

'No. But your half of the equation.'

He moved restlessly, put his drink down untouched. 'Has Brian *said* anything to you?'

'No.'

'If he'd guessed, he would have said something, surely?'

'I don't know. Probably. But if it doesn't happen now, it'll be some other time, Nick.' She heard echoes from some gloomy Shakespearian play: 'If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it *will*

come. . . .' She shivered; everybody had died at the end of that play, if she remembered aright.

'Somehow it's all got a bit out of control,' Nick said.

She was almost exasperated. 'Will you tell me something?'

'What?'

'How do you really feel about me?'

He looked at her, and away. 'There are times when I feel like saying "I love you". But my love isn't worth very much.'

'My love isn't worth very much either,' she said, sighing. 'If it's going to . . . end, Nick – now's the time for me to go.'

But he hadn't wanted it to end like that. And so now Ann was asking her mother-in-law what it was like to be married to someone who's two-timing you.

'Since you've asked me,' Mary Hammond said, 'I would much rather Robert had told me.'

'Why?'

'He had another life,' Mary said, 'of which I was no part. But I was never given the opportunity to influence what was going on, or to change *our* way of life, if I thought that was best. I would have preferred to have the option.'

'Yes,' Ann murmured, 'that makes sense.'

'I loved my husband very much. He may have thought he was protecting me, but in fact I was deprived of my right to look the truth in the face.'

So that was her answer. Was she going to use it as the basis for action?

She looked at her husband during the next day or two, rehearsing the words she was going to say. But until she talked it over with Nick she ought not to do anything.

Brian sensed the tension in her, but could not divine the reason. Did it mean that she and Fox were splitting up? Or were they determined to stick together? He waited, but she told him nothing. Therefore he went day by day to the depot trying to deal with the work-load and the problems of the board-room, while part of his mind was always elsewhere, wondering what Ann was doing.

Christmas came and went. The children were home from boarding school for two brief weeks.

Came the day of the fateful board meeting – the yea or nay

of going public. Martin Farrell arrived early, to find Jennifer talking to Bill Riley on the doorstep of the traffic office. They exchanged good-mornings.

'Do you need me to show you round, Mr Farrell?'

'Not today, thank you, Mr Riley.' As Riley nodded and moved off, Farrell joined Jennifer as she went towards the stairs. 'I think I'm a little ahead of time.'

'The others are ready, though. We can go up.' She led the way. 'Will you need to visit Dover again?'

He thanked her for making his trip there so pleasant but said he thought he needn't go again for the present. She asked him about other travelling trips he'd undertaken, expressed some envy at hearing he'd recently been to Vienna. She felt his eyes dwelling on her with pleasure, and because he approved she found herself warming to him.

In the boardroom they settled down quickly. Farrell read his report on the present state of Hammond Transport Ltd as he saw it. It was a succinct and clear document, giving a favourable view.

Edward listened to it with undisguised satisfaction. 'So in the light of your investigation into the company, Mr Farrell, you feel that you can recommend us to apply for a stock exchange quotation?'

'Recommendation is not part of my brief. The necessary groundwork is there but the decision rests with your board of directors.'

'That decision has already been taken,' Brian intervened. 'We go public unless your report proved to be negative – and it isn't.'

Farrell made a movement of agreement to signify that his report was favourable.

'In our case, are you in favour of our going public, or against it?' Edward asked.

'I've stated my reservations.'

'Which are of a technical nature,' Brian insisted. 'We have a good profits forecast, and ample borrowing facilities—'

'Profits forecasts aren't quite the same as profits safely stowed away. And some shareholders might prefer cash reserves to expectations. However, that needn't stop you, I agree.'

This struck Jennifer as damning with faint praise. 'You seem to be rather doubtful?'

He gave her his sudden smile 'You mustn't confuse professional caution with pessimism, Miss Kingsley.' To Edward he continued, 'Becoming a public company has many attractions for a firm in your position. A successful issue of your shares would be highly beneficial – a shot of adrenalin. But –' he tapped the table lightly '– if the launch were not successful for some reason – if large numbers of shares were left with the underwriters . . . you could be left in a very difficult position.'

Brian refused to entertain that idea 'You'll make sure the shares are pitched at the right price. There's no reason why the launching shouldn't be completely successful.'

'Given the support of big investors,' Farrell agreed, 'the institutions such as pension funds – that's true.'

'And I imagine you'll be working on them, right from the very beginning,' Brian pursued.

'I have spoken off the record to one or two of the more important people, who might be interested already.'

'Then there's nothing to stop it—'

'I only want to make it very clear,' Farrell insisted, 'that there are many hurdles to be jumped, and a number of fairly delicate negotiations to be carried out.'

David spoke unexpectedly. 'The more I listen to all this, the more I feel that it's going to be much more complex than I'd imagined.'

Brian gave him a stare of anger. Edward said: 'Too right!'

'I'd be much happier,' David went on, 'if Mr Farrell would agree to join this board at once.'

'Hear, hear,' said Jennifer.

'Yes,' said Brian in relief, 'we obviously need his advice and guidance on a continuing basis.' That was a bad moment Dave had given him, but in fact it had worked well.

Edward said, 'Mr Farrell hasn't accepted our invitation yet. His response was conditional.'

'As I understand it, Mr Hammond, the invitation is conditional upon your being satisfied with the structure of the board?'

'Could we finalise matters next week, Mr Farrell?'

'Oh, really, is this what we're reduced to?' Brian exclaimed. 'Waiting to hear if Riley is going to condescend to sit here and make trouble?'

'Is that all right with you, Mr Farrell?' Edward said with complete calm.

'Perfectly,' Farrell agreed, equally calm.

Brian's thin face was white with indignation. 'Ted, you're deliberately perverting the known wishes of this board.'

But Ted refused to be perturbed. He sat back. He looked at the others.

It was Martin Farrell who spoke. 'Could I suggest that we now go through my written report item by item?'

Everyone shuffled papers. Brian, baffled, had to submit.

The week went by. Riley mulled over his decision. He had an appointment with Edward at nine o'clock on the morning of the next board meeting but, when Gwen questioned him, still didn't seem to know what he was going to say.

'But you *have* to make up your mind, Bill,' she admonished.

'I'll tell you what bothers me. The fact that he wants me on the board so badly.'

Gwen put a hand on his shoulder as she passed his chair. 'I know he shouts at you now and then, Bill,' she said, 'but I think he's got a lot of time for you, really.'

'There's more to it than that,' Riley said glumly. 'He reckons that sooner or later he's going to have a real battle on his hands and when that time comes, he wants me there on his side.'

She could see nothing wrong with that. 'He's shown a lot of faith in you, Bill. You owe him something for that.'

He shook his head. 'I don't like being in anyone's debt. I never did.'

'Oh,' she said, in gasping indignation, 'you are the most obstinate, aggravating man—!'

Riley said suddenly, 'I don't want to let him down, Gwen.' There was an agony of concern in his voice.

'Let him down? Let him down? You?' His wife couldn't believe her ears.

As he went into the hall she followed, to help him on with

his coat. 'I've never known you take so long to make up your mind about anything,' she sighed.

When she waved him goodbye she still didn't know what his decision would be. No one, in fact, knew it – until he walked into the boardroom at Edward's heels. He looked much as usual except that his lips seemed to be sewn together, which was to prevent them trembling although no one would have guessed.

The others showed their feelings according to their characters: Jennifer gave him a beaming smile, David nodded with affability, and Brian ignored him. For Brian his arrival was like a slap in the face. All his efforts to modernise and streamline the board were wasted because as a counterweight to Martin Farrell, Edward had insisted on promoting this oaf.

Edward knew what Brian was feeling. But that didn't prevent him making his little speech. 'My first duty, my first pleasant duty, is to extend a warm welcome to the new members of this board, Mr Farrell and Mr Riley.'

'I'll second that,' David said. 'Welcome aboard.'

Jennifer nodded in agreement. 'We're all glad you decided to accept, Martin, and you too, Bill.'

'Thank you,' said Farrell.

'Aye,' said Riley.

'And we can now announce that Mr Riley has been offered and has accepted the post of Traffic Manager,' Edward added.

Pointedly not referring to Riley, Brian said, 'I'm sure we shall all look forward to having the benefit of Martin's excellent advice.'

'Martin's excellent advice' was much in demand throughout the board meeting. It was probably the worst occasion that could have been chosen for Riley to join the board, since it was almost entirely taken up with the technicalities of going public. Riley understood one word in twenty. For over an hour Farrell explained and answered questions. At length Edward glanced at his watch, and Farrell as always was quick to take the hint.

'Up to now,' he concluded, 'my discussions with my prin-

cipals at the bank and various associates have been informal. I would suggest we now take the first concrete step and arrange a meeting.'

'Where?'

'It would probably be a lunch in the City.'

'Just yourself, you mean?' Edward asked.

'No, no, a small team. Yourself, of course, Mr Chairman, and I'd suggest Brian as well.'

'Right. Can we leave you to arrange that?'

'Yes of course, Mr Chairman. And that concludes my extremely lengthy analysis.'

'A very lucid analysis,' Brian amended, 'I'm sure that all of us, without exception, now have a clear grasp of the protocol involved.' He flicked a glance at Riley, as if to say, If you've learned anything, it doesn't show.

'Well, I know more than I did,' Edward admitted. 'Are there any more questions for Mr Farrell?'

'I think we all put our queries as we went along,' Jennifer said.

'Mr Riley hasn't said a word all afternoon,' said Brian. 'Could we have the benefit of his contribution?'

Riley turned a baleful eye upon him. 'I'd rather listen to kick off with, Mr Chairman. And maybe learn.'

'We know you'll speak up when you're ready, Bill,' Edward soothed, thinking daggers at Brian. He closed the meeting and they rose, forming natural groups as they straggled towards the door. Riley seemed to belong to none of them and after standing about for a minute, went off on his own, shoulders hunched. Brian, seeing him from the corner of his eye, felt a mean satisfaction. If there was nothing else to be done, they could freeze him out.

But as he drove home Brian began to be very troubled. Riley was now a co-director, a colleague. However little Brian understood or liked the man, it was his duty now to try to work with him.

He thought about his own reactions to Riley. He didn't really dislike the new Traffic Manager all that much. In the past he'd seldom had dealings with him except when trouble

blew up in a situation man-versus-management, and at those times Brian had usually enough commonsense to know that Riley's dour style and his obduracy were as much a tactic as the management's soothing syrup.

So why was he being so bloody to Riley? The answer came at once: because Riley made a handy whipping boy.

All the time, anger and frustration were simmering inside Brian's skull. Unless he wanted to wreck his marriage he couldn't express any of his feelings against Ann. So instead he was a bastard to Riley.

Was this what she'd brought him to? Spiteful, mean and patronising – he heard his own voice echoing in his head, saying some of the things he'd said to Bill Riley. There had been a time when Brian Hammond's name had stood for integrity and dependability, but now. . . .

He recalled what Dave had said about his boardroom manoeuvres: 'The end justifies the means? A dubious doctrine, I've always thought.' Dubious was the word for his methods and his reasons. He had justified himself to himself by claiming he was doing all this for the good of Hammonds – and he did indeed believe that Hammonds would benefit enormously from the acquisition of a man like Martin on the board, from going public. But if he was honest with himself he would have to admit that it was for Ann that he had begun all this. No, not for Ann; because of Ann.

She'd never troubled to conceal the fact that she thought Hammonds was a second-rate firm. She'd never really agreed with his giving up accountancy for the lesser income and prestige of a haulage company. It was Ann who had put it into his head that he would make a better chairman than Edward and thus initiated the palace revolution.

That had been unsuccessful. All the plotting with Dave over the shares Jenny had offered for sale had come to nothing. But other things that he had initiated about that time had gone on, gathering momentum: the spread into Europe, the Dover depot, the alliance with Van der Moewe, the advertising campaign and its resultant increase in business . . . and now the move to become a public company.

In a way all of these things, though they had a basis in good

business sense, had been because of Ann. 'I'll show you!' – that had been the motivation.

Somewhere, some time, he'd read something about the beauty of Cleopatra: 'The nose of Cleopatra – if it had been a sixteenth of an inch shorter, the course of the world might have been different. . . .' Something like that. There was a similarity in his own case; 'If Ann had loved me, I might never have done any of those things. . . .'

The lives of the six people now on the board, deeply affected; Dave's wife Jill, Jenny's daughter Barbara, Riley's wife Gwen, his own wife and children, his mother – all these people had felt the repercussions of his actions. The employees of Hammonds and their wives and kids . . . and so on, an endless chain, all touched and altered by the things Brian Hammond had done or caused to be done – because, fundamentally, he wanted to impress his wife, by turning Hammonds from a family business into a public company.

This cold analysis was too much to bear, as excruciatingly painful as needles of ice penetrating his mind and soul. He closed it out of his thoughts in sheer self-preservation. He'd drive himself mad if he went on like this.

At home Ann, rather to his surprise, was curled on the sofa, a writing pad on her knee, writing the weekly letters to the children at boarding-school. She got up as he came in, asking if he wanted tea and making it for him.

'How did the board meeting go?'

'As well as can be expected, as the doctors say.' He wondered whether to tell her about Riley's directorship, but he doubted if she knew Riley so that a long description would be involved and she would get bored. In any case she'd already turned away.

She went back to her letters. He poured and drank a cup of tea, standing at the breakfast bar, turning over with one hand the copious notes he'd taken at the meeting.

Dusk was falling. The room filled with shadows. It dawned on him that, curled on the sofa in the living-room area, Ann couldn't possibly see to write. He made for the stairs intending to clean up and change his shoes. As he passed the sofa he glanced at Ann, wondering if she were asleep – but she was

not. Head bent, she was running a finger up and down the edge of the writing pad. Her engagement ring gleamed as it caught the reflection of the kitchen light.

She didn't look up as he passed.

A little later, when he settled to work at his desk, she began to move about the room. At first it disturbed him but soon he began to lose himself in planning the scenario for the meeting with the bankers: he must obtain absolutely up-to-date figures on running costs because he had a shrewd idea there would be questions on the fuel oil situation. . . .

Unexpectedly Ann spoke: 'We'll have dinner about eight, shall we?'

'Mm?' He wrenched his concentration away. After a moment he said, 'You're not going out then?'

'Obviously not.'

'Oh.' Was that good or bad? 'Just a snack for me,' he murmured. 'I had rather a heavy lunch.'

'Just a snack. Now or later?'

'Oh, later. I'm busy now.'

'Do you have much to do?'

'Mm?' Already his attention was returning to the notes on his desk.

'Much work?'

'Martin's arranging a luncheon in a day or two, to meet his associates.'

'Associates.' He could see her trying to recall who Martin's associates might be.

'The bankers. I want to be ready for it.'

She seemed all at once to square her shoulders. 'Do you have to do it now?'

'Well . . . not this minute. Why?'

'I'd like to talk to you.'

He turned to look at her, but still with his pen in his hand. 'Yes?'

She felt the sting of irritation that he so often caused. 'Not like that, Brian. Not two minutes before you go back to work. It's important.'

'Oh.' Now what was in the air? He got up and went to the

couch. 'You mean you want me to sit comfortably?' he inquired with irony.

'Yes.'

'Is it about the children?'

'No. Well, yes . . . it affects them.' Was she really going to do it? She didn't know even now. She could veer away, she could lie – she'd done it many times before for other reasons.

Brian felt a cold finger touch him. It affects the children . . . what was she going to say? All at once he began talking hard. 'I know they seem to be reasonably happy at boarding-school—'

'Brian, I'd rather leave that—'

'Let me finish please.' Let me build a last barrier. Let me try for the millionth time to say something you want to hear. 'I've been giving this a great deal of thought, Ann. That strange business of Carole phoning her old teacher – she was lonely, and it seems to me that to have her and Nigel at home. . . . Suppose we looked for somewhere much bigger – in the country, perhaps, or near your parents if you like. It would mean more time spent in travelling for me, but other people manage.'

'Your travelling time is the last thing I want to talk about—'

'It's not very important, I agree. But a house in the country, Ann. . . .' He was watching her. Incredibly, the more he talked the more determined she seemed to grow. 'For years you've been saying you want to move, Ann. Well, now I'd like to move as well.'

'Where we live isn't important any more.' Yes, she was going to tell him. If it be now, 'tis not to come. It would be done, it would be over.

'But it could be important, Ann. A place with plenty of room, some land – you could keep a horse, you love riding.' He could hear himself offering the bribes. He was sick at himself, but he couldn't stop. 'I think I shall soon be able to afford more of the good things in life. We could have the children at home, find good day-schools – but you wouldn't be tied down. We could get an au pair girl—'

'I wish I could say I thought it was a good idea—'

'Don't say anything,' he begged, 'until you've had time to think it over. Let's leave it for a while, and we'll both

consider what's best for both of us and the children.' The children. Suddenly he pictured them: Nigel, sturdy and uncomplicated, looking up with trusting eyes that expected only good things from grown-ups; Carole, her thin face drawn with anxiety and reluctance as they drove her to the boarding school, her storm of tears as they left her. Did Ann see them? Did she consider them? 'Let's think how to have a good life for all of us. All right?'

'No, Brian. I'm sorry. It's not all right.' Brian's mother had said: 'I would much rather Robert had told me . . . I was deprived of the right to look the truth in the face.'

'Give the idea a chance,' Brian begged, 'that's all I ask.'

But Ann had erased from her memory the rest of Mary's words: '. . . The opportunity to influence what was going on, or to change *our* way of life. . . .' Brian was trying to do that, to change their way of life to something she would enjoy. And Ann replied: 'It's too late for that.'

'I'm sorry,' Brian said helplessly.

'So am I.'

But now that it came to the point she didn't know how to begin.

'You wanted to talk to me?' Brian prompted.

She nodded. 'Bear with me if you can. This isn't easy to say.' She looked at him, and for a moment he bowed his head then looked up and met her eyes. 'People change, Brian,' she hurried on. 'It's no one's fault, it just happens. I was eighteen when we were married. I thought I was terribly grown up, but I wasn't. That's a long time ago now. I'm a different person to the young girl I was then.'

'Am I a different person?' her husband asked.

'In a way. You're more thrusting, more ambitious—'

'*You* wanted that,' he cut in.

She sighed. 'I think we all want different things at different times.'

'That makes it difficult for those who don't change easily, Ann.'

'You value consistency too much, Brian.' He shrugged, and after a moment she took up the thread again. 'The way my solid middle-class parents brought me up, a girl took it for

granted that she'd meet the right man, marry, have children, keep house, keep her looks – oh, yes, that was important because she must please her husband – in short, the idea was to be a good-looking housekeeper. This would go on, I imagined in a vague sort of way, for many years, while the children grew up, everybody got older, until eventually the girl became an elegant, good-looking grandmother.' She had opened the cigarette box as she was speaking, and now she broke off as she impatiently lit a cigarette.

'I bought all that unspoken indoctrination,' she confessed, 'and I married the first mature man who came along and whom I liked. It might have been better if I'd played the field till I was twenty-five . . . but that's being wise after the event. Playing the field presented problems even then and one was supposed to stay a virgin.'

Brian studied her. She was totally self-engrossed. Whatever it was that she intended to say in the end, it was clear she was only thinking of it as it affected herself.

She felt his gaze on her as she blew smoke out. It was a little unnerving. He wasn't the same man who a moment ago had been almost babbling to stave off this moment.

'You like order,' she pointed out. 'You like stability, security. You prefer a routine. I don't.'

'Are you saying you'd like to get a job?' For it could be that; she might feel she needed a new horizon.

'No.'

'If you want to try and find something that would satisfy you, we could employ someone to look after the children in the holidays—'

'I'm not that sort of person. I'm not a career woman.'

'No.'

'I'm the sort of woman who's attractive to men. I know that and I enjoy it. Over the years there have been men who wanted me—'

'And that's important to you?'

'The men weren't, but being admired was.' She hadn't meant to tell all that to Brian, but in a way it was an explanation of why she'd ever allowed herself to get involved with

Nick. Now she suddenly knew she was going to utter the words to Brian. 'Now something's happened. I've met someone. Whether you believe me or not, I didn't want it to happen. But it has and there's nothing I can do about it. I've fallen in love.'

The phrases – rather staccato, rather uneven – rattled in the silence like dice on a board. Brian almost didn't hear them after the first realisation of their intent. He was staring at his wife.

All the work, all the camouflage, all the weeks of pain and silence . . . gone for nothing.

'Well?' she said.

'Well what?'

'Aren't you going to say anything?'

'No.'

'Wouldn't you like to know who it is?'

'I know already,' he said. 'Nicholas Fox.'

She gave a little slow nod. 'We wondered. . . .'

'Oh yes,' he said 'I spoke to him about it one day.'

'He told me about it. He said you were very ambiguous. We weren't sure.'

'I was trying to avoid a scene, while obliquely asking him – both of you – to come to your senses.'

She moved away, out of range of his cool scrutiny. 'How did you find out?' she asked.

Why the hell should that matter? But she always had had a passion for intricacy. 'Can you remember before the overdose? You were very upset, you got careless. You sent him a telegram while he was in Brussels. You used this phone.'

'The phone bill?' So that was it. Ironic, really. If she hadn't let the habit evolve whereby Brian took care of all the household bills, he would never have seen it.

'I didn't remember sending a telegram to Brussels. When I queried it I had the message read back to me.' He heard again in memory the bright girl's voice repeating them to him. ' "I need you. Signed – Ann." '

'That was careless,' she admitted. 'I forgot that telegrams are itemised.'

A marriage on the rubbish-heap, and that was all she could say – she'd been careless. 'You got a parking ticket,' he went

on. 'You said you'd been to Janet's, but your car was parked outside Nicholas Fox's flat.'

'How did you find that out?' she asked, genuinely surprised.

'The counterfoil.'

'But I threw that away!' She frowned. 'Do you mean to say you went through the dustbin?'

He ignored that. 'That evening I rang Nicholas Fox. You were there, he spoke to you. And another time I drove by and I saw your car.'

'So you've known all about it. . . .'

'For a while, yes.'

Fury seized her. Prying and poking! Those precious times when she was with Nick, safe in their own private world . . . Brian had been watching, listening, waiting.

'You let me go through all the rigmarole,' she cried, 'trying to tell you gently, trying to explain! And you knew all the time. My God, you've had a marvellous time, haven't you? Ferreting in dustbins, checking telegrams, following me like some grubby little private detective! Did it give you a nasty little kick to know what I was doing?'

He was wooden under her attack. 'No.'

'Then why the hell didn't you have the guts to say something instead of pretending that everything was normal?'

'When it comes to pretending, Ann,' he said, an edge to his voice, 'I have a great deal to learn from you. As for why I said nothing, perhaps I did it to see just how long you'd go on lying and cheating and writing those sickening letters –' he picked up the pad on which she'd been writing and dropped it so that the pages fluttered '– to the children signed "Love, Mummy and Daddy." '

Her brown eyes were bright with anger. 'What do you think I should have signed? What's the use of dragging in the children?'

'But they're not "dragged in" – they *exist*. What are you going to do about them?'

'I haven't thought that far ahead,' she replied, brought up short.

'Do you intend to tell them about your great love affair?' he asked bitterly.

'I'll talk to them . . . when I know what to tell them.'

'I see. For the moment, I have the honour of being your only confidant.'

Her anger had ebbed away. She saw that he was deeply hurt.

'It had got to the point where I had to tell you,' she said. 'It was only fair.' She was unable to admit to herself that she had spoken because she was at the end of her tether. Fairness hardly came into it.

Brian shook his head. 'I don't think you know much about being fair, Ann.' He got to his feet, feeling the need to find release in movement. 'You do know,' he queried, 'that Nicholas Fox has been married before?'

'He's told me all about himself. I know that he often sees his ex-wife.'

'Which one?' he asked with dryness. 'There are two, I believe.'

'The second.' She refused to rise to his irony. 'He was a student when he married his first wife and they split up after six months – as perhaps we should have done.'

He wouldn't let himself wince at that. The first six months for him had been a daze of happiness, and the six months after that, and after that. It was only the last couple of years that had lost their magic. But Ann, it seemed, had been disillusioned almost at once.

'So is it your intention to become Mrs Fox the Third?'

Ann threw out her hands. 'Brian, all I know is that, insofar as I'm capable of loving anyone, I love Nick.'

'And he is in the same happy situation?'

'We're two of a kind,' she sighed 'We'll have to make do as best we can.'

It sounded so bleak. He burst out, 'I tried, Ann, I really tried! I knew what you were going to say tonight and I tried to head you off.'

'With offers of a new home, a fresh start.'

'At least I offered.'

She didn't want to be reminded that his mother had said: 'The opportunity to change our way of life.' She'd told Brian because she wanted to tell Brian: that was the long and the

short of it. His life-saving attempts had been doomed before he began.

'I don't want a house in the country, Brian, or an au pair girl, or even a horse of my own.' She made them sound absurd. 'For the first time in my life I know what it is to really love someone.'

'You don't love anyone except yourself!' he told her. 'You use one word over and over again – "I"! I this, I that, I feel so and so, I want such and such. Your world begins and ends with yourself. You're shallow, you're superficial, you're utterly self-centred!'

'My God,' she said, flaring up, 'do you think you're such a paragon? You're a predictable bore, Brian! You don't want a wife, you want a second mother to cook and clean and say "There, there" and—' She broke off as he made for the door, picking up his raincoat as he went. 'And where do you think you're going?'

'Out.'

It had never been part of her mental scene-painting that Brian should walk out on her. She was the one who ought to make the sweeping exit.

'Can't face it, eh?' she said cruelly.

He came back a pace or two. His face was a mask, his voice quite calm.

'Ann,' he said, 'I've kept my eyes closed because I didn't want to see. For a long time I didn't know about Nicholas Fox because I didn't want to know. Now I've finally been forced to face the fact that my wife is –' he slowed to space out the words '– a selfish whore. And I'd rather try to come to terms with that on my own.'

He went out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ON the day of the bankers' lunch, Martin Farrell arrived early at the depot, carrying with him several large rolls of paper which caused immediate curiosity when Jennifer Kingsley saw them.

'Good morning, Martin,' she said, eyeing them.

'Good morning. I thought I'd spend the morning with Brian and Ted, going over the set-up. I want to make sure they understand the implications.'

'They're not in yet.'

'Good. I intended being early.' He was unrolling one of the papers on to the boardroom table.

'I thought bankers liked the streets to be aired?' Jennifer said, holding down two corners for him.

'I'm always up at six.'

'I'm usually awake early too.'

'Being on one's own, I suppose.' He looked at her, and an unspoken recognition passed between them of each other's problems. 'Still, there are compensations,' he said, nodding at his work.

The rolls of paper proved to be graphs and charts, meticulously presented.

'Everything at a glance,' he said, pointing to the subject headings.

'Yes,' Jennifer murmured. 'I can see Brian being very impressed.'

He laughed. 'I don't think so. Accountants generally carry most of the patterns in their heads. We tend to overlook the fact that everyone else doesn't see them so clearly.' He glanced about. 'Drawing pins?'

'I'll get some.'

'I'd like to set my stall out before Ted arrives – visual impact and all that.'

'He's usually here by now,' she said, heading for the door.

'Just a minute.'

'Yes?' She paused.

'Before the day catches up with me and takes over . . . I wondered if you'd care to have dinner with me – perhaps this evening?'

She was genuinely surprised at the invitation. 'I'm not sure, Martin.'

'Oh, nothing splendid. I generally eat out. I thought,' he said, and there was a wistfulness in the tone, 'a little company would make a welcome change.'

She nodded in understanding.

'Think about it,' he said. 'I'll get back to you later in the day, after the lunch.'

Jennifer was in and out of the boardroom the rest of the morning as her own workload permitted. Farrell stayed there carrying on a sort of informal teach-in with Brian and Ted. Ted arrived looking rather splendid, in a new suit which Jennifer guessed had come from Savile Row. She felt a little surge of pride. He would make a good impression in the City.

Brian, on the contrary, seemed oddly disorganised and unlike himself. She first noticed it when he came in, a little later than usual, and gave only perfunctory attention to Martin's graphs. In fact it was Ted who showed all the interest, rather to her surprise.

Little by little it dawned on her that something was badly wrong with Brian.

'Are you unwell?' she asked in an undertone.

'No, I'm fine.'

She glanced round the boardroom as Martin was packing up his papers ready to leave for the lunch. Ted was helping him.

'Ted looks the part, don't you think?' she said.

'Yes.'

'Well, why are you worrying, Brian?'

'I'm not.'

'I've been watching you. Something at home?' she asked gently.

A spasm of grief contorted his face momentarily but he recovered at once. 'Not now, Jenny. Please.' And to the others: 'Are we ready?'

When they had gone, Jennifer took the one remaining direc-

tor – Riley – for a pub lunch across the road. David hadn't even come in. Knowing that today he was somewhat *de trop*, he'd chosen to stay at home and do some telephoning. Moreover, he was still trying to get over a fit of resentment caused by his wife.

Their wedding anniversary had been at the weekend. He had given Jill a rather beautiful Victorian bracelet of garnets and silver. She had given *him* – ye Gods! – a penthouse apartment.

Two days later, he still burned with shame at the angry scene he had made when she, with much innocent mystery-making and loving fun, had taken him on a 'prezzie hunt' which had ended at the door of the penthouse flat.

'Here?' he said, baffled.

'Yes, darling.' She took the doorkey out of her handbag and gave it to him.

Dazed and still unbelieving, he opened the door and went in. The place was unfurnished and vast, with a beautiful view over London, showing Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. In the middle of the floor of the living-room – or drawing-room, or perhaps dining-room – a large card had been propped against an empty paint can. It said: 'Happy Anniversary, darling. Love Jill.'

'You mean *this* is my present?' he said.

'Do you like it?' she asked, her eyes dancing.

'My *God*!' he roared. 'Are you out of your mind?'

Well, it had been awful. He'd been a brute. Poor Jill had wept and tried not to, he had said daft things, she had dried her tears and lost her temper, and they'd gone to bed and turned their backs on one another.

Happy Anniversary.

There had been a time, when they were first married, when he wouldn't have known what to do. But a year had gone by, a year in which he'd fallen more and more in love with Jill with every passing day. So this morning, not being needed at the depot, he devoted himself to putting things right.

When he got up Jill was in the kitchen. He wandered in there, still only half awake.

'I'm sorry I was angry,' he said.

'Mm?' she said, buttering toast noisily.

'But I'm still angry.'

'Just a minute,' she said, still buttering.

'There's not much point, though.'

She put the toast on a plate, the plate on a tray, and handed the tray to him. 'I was going to give you breakfast in bed.'

'I don't eat breakfast in bed.'

'I've drawn a face on your egg,' she coaxed. 'Look.'

'You eat it. I want to talk,' he said, giving back the tray.

'I don't eat breakfast – you know that. Though it looks nice, doesn't it?'

'Well, give up modelling, then. Listen, Jill – I want to discuss this ridiculous penthouse, seriously.'

'I'm going to sell it.' She sat down on a kitchen chair with the tray on her lap. 'I'm sorry I bought it. I meant it as a sort of present to both of us. I didn't think about how it would seem to you.'

'Why do you always have to windmill into things?' David sighed. She seemed so genuinely penitent that he took the tray, sat down, and began to eat.

'It was for our anniversary.'

'People don't go around buying penthouses as little surprise anniversary presents.'

'But I know you don't like my money, darling. It was a way of getting rid of it.'

He paused with a piece of toast halfway to his mouth, aghast. 'Did it cost *that* much?'

'I'm not telling you how much it cost,' she said, blinking tears back.

He munched for a moment. 'It makes me feel bought, Jill.'

'Yes.'

'You know what I mean?'

'It was a mistake,' she agreed, her voice quavering. 'I'll see the estate agent today.'

'I can't afford a place like that. I probably never will be able to afford it.'

'I didn't want it for me, David. I'm quite happy here.'

'So am I.'

'I might even make a profit when I sell. Less tax.'

'Yes.'

'Pity, though. It's a nice place.'

'Oh, yes.'

'But it's nice here too.'

There was a long silence, broken only by the crunching of David's toast.

'We'll move as soon as we can,' he said.

'What!'

'We may as well.'

'Oh, darling!'

'Don't ask me to say thank you,' he warned. 'I shouldn't know where to begin.'

He got dressed and did some telephoning while Jill went into one of those feminine trances over the colour of curtains and bedspreads. They were eating an amicable lunch while Jennifer Kingsley was buying Bill Riley a pint at the Waggoner's Rest. When the phone rang David automatically went to answer it, but it was for Jill. He served the pudding while she talked. When she came back her pretty face was dark with ire.

'That filming!'

'What filming – Oh, the thing in Cornwall, that you were doing while Mother was ill?'

'I'm out.'

'Where?'

'They've cast someone else.'

David put her pudding in front of her. 'Would you mind going back a bit?'

'You remember I told you it was all awful and the weather was bad and the advertising firm had second thoughts.'

He didn't. 'Yes,' he said.

'Well, that was Andres, the assistant producer. I'm not in it when they re-shoot. They've cast someone else.'

'Great,' David said.

'I'm glad', she said, slamming her spoon down on the dish. 'It was all so awful.'

'What was wrong with it?'

'You name it. Everything. Even I knew.'

'So really you're well out of it.'

'The thing is nobody *tells* you. Andres rang me because I

listened to all his personal problems and he's fond of me. But otherwise I'd still be waiting to hear when I started on the new version.'

He came round the table to console her with a kiss or two on the cheek and the tip of her ear. 'Cheer up,' he murmured. 'You'll be busy choosing carpets for the new flat.'

'David—!' She looked up at him so suddenly they almost collided. 'I've made a decision.'

'Wow-ee,' he said. 'Another one?'

'If I can stick to it. . . . To quit modelling.'

'Altogether?'

'Yes. Eat breakfast again. Furnish the new flat. Guzzle cherry pie.' She picked up a spoonful of cherry pie and waved it. 'Get fat. Get pregnant. The hell with it.'

'My,' her husband said with admiration, 'when you make decisions, you make 'em.' He took her spoonful of pie and ate it, and she laughed.

David's two brothers were lunching in a totally different atmosphere. The City restaurant was a remarkable place, more like a private house than a public eating-place. The furnishing was heavily Victorian – mahogany tables and chairs, wallpapers of dark red silk, a grandfather clock ticking tranquilly. Waiters and doormen in livery moved about, skilled and unobtrusive.

Brian and Edward followed Martin Farrell to an alcove where there was a small bar. Edward noted with some awe that the glassware used in the bar was crystal.

'Merroney's not here yet,' Farrell explained. 'He's sent a message saying he'll be over as soon as he can. What'll it be?'

Once more with awe, Edward noted that when Farrell gave the order, the barman said, 'Yes, Mr Farrell.' So he was an habitué. Edward began to feel he had been entertaining angels unawares – and perhaps been a little disrespectful in the doing of it. An important bloke, Martin Farrell.

'Excuse me,' Brian said suddenly, and went off towards the washroom. Farrell followed him with his eyes.

'Is he unwell?' he asked.

Edward shook his head in perplexity. 'Could it be nerves?'

'Do you want to go and see?'

'No, tell me about Merroney. Anything that might be useful.'

Farrell mentally gave him an extra mark for effort. Though Edward Hammond didn't really want to go public, nevertheless he was determined to make a good impression.

'What can I tell you? You already know Merroney is on the board of directors of the bank – appointed some four years ago. He's one of the top men on issuing for public companies, under Bowman and Sir Neville.'

'When do we get to meet *them*?'

'That, of course, depends,' Farrell said with his quiet smile.

'What else about Merroney?'

'He's a keen shot. He has a conscience about the environment. He likes Gabrieli.'

'Likes what?'

'It's a who – a composer of music before Bach.'

'Oh Lord.'

Yes, my dear friend, thought Farrell, you're a good man but what are you doing in this galère? Aloud he said, 'If Brian isn't well we can easily call it off.'

'No,' Edward said stubbornly.

A few minutes later Brian rejoined them. He had spent the interim splashing cold water on his face and getting a grip on himself.

'All right?' Edward asked.

'Yes.'

'Not feeling sick or anything?' said Farrell.

'No.'

He was watching a young man coming across the restaurant towards them. He was tall, dressed with discreet fashion, and was not much over thirty.

'Hi, Martin,' he said, coming up. 'Sorry. I was delayed.'

'Mr Edward Hammond, Mr Brian Hammond,' said Farrell. 'Mr Merroney.'

Edward was having a hard time keeping his mouth from dropping open. This lad? With the candid eyes and springy brown hair? He'd expected some grey old moneybags.

'Delighted to meet you,' Merroney said. 'Martin has spoken of you with a good deal of warmth.'

Damn decent of him, Edward grunted within himself. He was taken aback by the whole set-up. Here he'd been, just saying to himself, Gee whiz, Farrell must really be somebody because the barman knew him by name. Then along came this kid – well, young man – at least ten years younger than Farrell who yet seemed to be his superior. Gee whiz, Merroney must *really* be somebody.

He darted a glance at Brian for help. Brian, usually so deft in business encounters, was listening with a fixed smile to something Farrell was saying about mutual regard. Damn it to hell, thought Edward, I'm on my own.

All right. So be it. These, after all, were only men of business, and he was a businessman. He settled the lapels of his Savile Row jacket more easily at the collar-bone and said with a grin, 'We'll see what your opinion is, Mr Merroney, *after* we've dazzled you with a few figures.'

'I'm easily dazzled,' Merroney said, laughing. 'But I warn you – I have polaroid glasses in my pocket.'

When they went to the lunch table Edward was still carrying the banner for Hammonds, with able support from Farrell. But thank God, Brian rallied somewhere around the end of the fish course. Merroney was an approachable man – what Edward had heard described as 'clubbable'. But he was bright. By the holy, he was bright as Brasso. He asked questions; just when you thought you'd got past the sticky bit, he suddenly pointed out a crevasse under your feet when you were waving up towards the South Col, and all in all he gave Edward a vigorous run for his money.

Just as Edward was running out of puff, Brian came back to life. He produced papers from his briefcase, talked good sense. Edward, watching and listening, had the impression his brother was fighting his way to every point through some sort of morass; but Merroney didn't know him and so was unaware.

It was a working lunch in every sense. Edward felt he had never been stretched so much. Not only did he have to keep up with Merroney, not only did he have to recall and present figures, but he had to 'sell' his own point of view.

'What I particularly want to say, Mr Merroney, is that we're a family business. I'd like to think we could retain the personal

touch we've always had. With respect, that's something I've seen disappear from firms that have gone into the City.'

Merroney looked at him with alert brown eyes. 'Are you sure it doesn't so much disappear as take on new forms, Mr Hammond?' Farrell nodded at this, and Merroney went on: 'Personal touch is one thing when you're face to face with your clients, but it's something else when you're presiding over a company.'

'That's what I'm afraid of.'

'I think perhaps you misunderstand me,' Merroney said with a quizzical glance.

'Shouldn't we perhaps move on?' Brian prompted. 'We don't want to waste time on vague concepts that—'

'It's not wasted time, Brian,' Farrell objected, 'if it's something Ted's concerned about.'

'Yes, I'd like to clarify what I meant,' Merroney resumed. 'The personal touch is simply concern for your client's well-being. Correct me if I'm wrong.'

'No, I'd go along with that.'

'And as I understand it, you feel that it's impossible on a large scale?'

'Yes.'

'I think you overlook the fact that it's part of our job to find new ways of providing a service which, by sheer weight of numbers, can no longer be performed on a personal basis.'

'And it's our aim,' Farrell added, 'to bring you our experience of handling these large and potentially impersonal concerns.'

'Put like that, I admit I'm probably worrying unnecessarily.'

Merroney, having humoured Edward enough for the moment – or so it seemed to Brian – moved on to discuss how the shares should be offered to the public and in what time schedule. He collected up all the paperwork Brian had brought. He had to submit it to his masters, he said cheerfully, and would let them know within a week. To Farrell he directed a request that they should meet in Merroney's office that afternoon for a little chat. He shook hands all round and was gone with his long-legged stride as quickly as he came.

The others ordered three brandies as a celebration; Farrell

said he thought it was justified. Brian said miserably: 'I'm sorry, Ted. I wasn't much help.'

'No,' Ted agreed without pretence. 'But as it turned out Martin and I could manage.'

After the brandies Farrell departed to keep his appointment with Merroney. Ted took Brian back to the depot, and on the way demonstrated his new toy and status symbol: a car telephone. He rang his mother to check on how she was, a thing he habitually did each day about three o'clock.

'Brian's with me,' he said, 'd'you want a word?' He handed the instrument to Brian.

'Hullo, Mother?' Brian said. 'How are you?'

'Quite well, dear,' Mary said. She cleared her throat. 'Ann is with me.'

'What did you say? I can't hear you properly.'

'I said Ann is with me.'

Brian went cold. 'Why is she there? Did you invite her?'

'No, Brian. It was her idea. She had something to tell me.'

'She – what?'

'She says, dear . . . she says you and she are breaking up.'

It had been an excruciatingly embarrassing and hurtful encounter for Mary. She and Ann had never been close, so she was surprised to get a phone call proposing another visit so soon after the last one. There had been something strange about Ann's voice; Mary, rather unwillingly, had agreed.

Ann had looked irritated at seeing Gwen Riley there. It was entirely typical of her that she'd never bothered to find out who kept Mary company during the day, or even to imagine that Mary needed someone.

Gwen, seeing she wasn't wanted, took herself off to make coffee. Ann wasted no time once she and Mary were alone. 'I want to be completely honest – to myself, to you, to Brian.'

'Yes,' said Mary, at a loss, but alarmed.

'I've already told Brian.'

'What have you told him?'

'I know now I should never have married him.'

Mary began to feel faintly dizzy; anxiety was making her heart pound. 'That feeling isn't uncommon, Ann.'

'I don't love him.'

'I see. . . .'

'I don't think I ever really did.'

'But you have two children—'

'I know. I'm not thinking of them at the moment. I'm being selfish.'

Mary began to think she was being asked to restore Ann's faith in her marriage. She said the obvious things, that Ann had a lot to be thankful for; to all of which her daughter-in-law assented.

'But I still don't love him.'

Mary recalled the strange conversation of a few nights ago. 'Is there someone else?'

Ann let the silence lengthen, keeping her mother-in-law in suspense, making her suffer.

'Yes,' she said at last.

'You've told Brian?'

'Yes.'

'Then I don't think I should hear any more, Ann.'

'I've got to tell someone,' Ann broke out. She moved restlessly about the room. 'May I get myself a drink?' She scarcely waited for permission before pouring brandy and gulping it down. Then she rushed on with her story. 'His name is Nicholas Fox. I love him but he doesn't love me – at least, not in the way you'd understand. He doesn't want to marry me.'

'Then what does he want?'

'Usually, just to go to bed.'

'Then you . . . you've been unfaithful?'

Ann gave a harsh laugh. My God, what did the old lady think she'd been saying? That they held hands?

'Brian knows this?' Mary faltered. 'How long. . . .'

'Oh, he's been sleeping on the downstairs couch since I told him'

'Why are you telling me this, Ann?'

'Because telling your son has no effect!' Ann shouted.

Mary collected her strength. 'I know him better than you, Ann. You will see.'

'Up to now he's said nothing. I don't think he will.' Ann swallowed more brandy. 'I gave him two choices.'

And what are your choices?'

'I can go, or I can stay.'

'Only one of those is your choice,' Mary replied with dignity. 'Whether you can stay is Brian's.'

It was at that moment that Edward's phone call on the car-phone came through. She asked Brian if he wanted to speak to his wife and was shocked by the fatigue and distress in his voice as he said no.

'He's angry,' she told Ann.

'Because I've told you, yes. He might find it harder now to get round to forgiving me. He doesn't understand,' Ann cried wildly. 'I don't *want* to be forgiven.'

'Why not, Ann?'

'Because it's weak.'

'I don't think it is,' Mary Hammond said. 'I think it's quite the opposite.'

'I'm always forgiven,' Ann said.

'Then I hope this time you won't be.'

'So do I.'

When Edward got home after an afternoon of mixed emotions, he could see his mother had been crying. It took only a few minutes' cross-questioning to get from her the gist of Ann's visit.

'The bitch!' he exclaimed.

'This time the breach seems irrevocable, Edward.'

'Then Brian will go to pieces altogether.'

'It's up to all of us to see that he doesn't.'

Edward had an idea that that would prove easier said than done. He could see again his brother's white, exhausted face as he put down the phone in his car after the conversation with his mother. He'd sent Brian home when they reached the depot, worried that he might actually collapse.

Brian reached home while it was still daylight. As he opened the front door he could hear loud pop music surging through the house. Ann was sitting on the sofa in the living-room, a glass in her hand. She wasn't drunk, though.

He went in, leaving his briefcase and his coat in the car. He

made straight for his desk, where he opened a drawer and began taking papers out.

'What are you looking for?' his wife demanded.

'Personal things.'

'What in particular?'

'Photographs. Of the children. Letters addressed to me from them.'

She almost cried out in relief and amazement. Something was going to happen! 'Well, look quietly, for God's sake,' she said.

But Brian was not in the mood to be quiet or tidy. Ann turned up the music. 'Is that necessary?' he asked.

'Yes!' she said defiantly.

'I need my bank statements and insurance policies.'

'I haven't touched them.'

'And the Building Society pass book.'

She shrugged. 'You're the expert at that sort of thing.'

He found what he was looking for and moved towards the stairs. En route he switched off the radio.

'I was listening!' Ann exclaimed.

'You can listen when I've gone.'

She got up to switch the music on again as he went upstairs. He stopped, turned, and came down again. She had turned her back on him in contempt. He stooped, took the radio lead in his fingers, and ripped it out.

She turned, astounded. 'What did you do a stupid thing like that for?'

Ignoring her, he went upstairs.

She called, furious: '*Brian*!' To spite him she switched on the transistor, the television, the tape-recorder – all at top volume. She stood in the midst of Babel, defiant and contemptuous. When he came downstairs with a suitcase she laughed. 'Are you going back to live with your mother?' she inquired.

Unspeaking, he paused. He picked up the transistor and smashed it to the floor. Bright plastic and wires went in all directions. In a man so utterly non-violent the act was appallingly savage.

She stared at him. 'You fool!'

Brian looked at her coolly. 'Would you please turn off the rest?'

'No!' she screamed in sudden rage. 'Smash them, go on! Smash the television. Go on! Three hundred and fifty pounds, because of a fit of temper.'

He went round the room switching off equipment. When he had silence he said: 'I'm leaving you.'

'For how long?' she said pertly.

'For good.'

'Well, now that you've told me, perhaps I can listen to some music.'

She switched on the television again, determined to provoke him.

'I'll be back some time during the week,' he said above the music, 'to make arrangements about my clothes.'

'Got your toothbrush and your pyjamas and your slippers?'

'I've got everything I need for the moment.' He began to make for the door.

She was by the television set, which he had to pass. She said as he came opposite: 'Oh, have you packed your bag to leave the wicked woman? How sweet!'

He hit her – one coolly calculated blow across the face, hard enough to knock her off balance.

She struggled up like a wildcat, fingers clawed, ready to tear his eyes out. She was screaming. As she got almost to her feet he brought up his hand, calmly, and pushed her down again, sprawling, ugly.

When she clambered to her feet he was gone. She rushed to the door. It was standing open. She was just in time to see his car drive off.

She had done it.

What had she done?

CHAPTER EIGHT

If the lives of the Hammond family in the next few months could have been expressed in one of Martin Farrell's elegant graphs, they would have shown a rising and fairly confident line under the heading 'Business' and an uncompromising downturn under 'Personal'.

The split between Ann and Brian, having been made public, seemed complete. Brian didn't go home to Mother as Ann had taunted: since Jill and David were moving to their splendid penthouse Brian took over David's flat where he lived alone, coping well with the problems of day-to-day living but growing more withdrawn and morose as time went on.

For Edward an unexpected threat appeared – and yet it wasn't really a threat, for he had no claims on Jennifer. Yet he couldn't watch the growing friendship between Jenny and Martin Farrell without pangs of jealousy. He hid them as best he could but, being Edward, wasn't very good at it. Farrell was puzzled at first because he'd thought there was a good relationship between himself and the chairman of Hammonds. A sensitive man, he soon realised what was wrong and, with the help of some gentle questions to Jenny, gained some understanding of both her situation and Edward's.

He led up to it one evening while they were having dinner at a restaurant he often patronised. Unintentionally the atmosphere had become very intimate and relaxed, for there was no one dining at the next table and the place, by contrast with the winter night outside, seemed warm, sheltered, soothing.

He had asked her about her daughter Barbara whom he'd never met. She explained that Barbara and her young husband had gone off to Ottawa after an almost totally disastrous business venture – the debts for which Jennifer had eventually settled, in a roundabout way, by means of a loan from Edward. She didn't tell Martin about how the debts were settled, or that she was still trying to pay back the money to Edward in the face of great reluctance on his part to accept a penny.

'So really you have no family,' Farrell said. 'No one else at all . . .'

'I suppose you could say that my only concern now is the continued success of the company.'

'Is that enough?'

'No,' she sighed, 'in one way it isn't.' Strange. . . . He was the only person who had ever asked that question.

The candle-flame flickered under its dark-red shade. Little shadows ran across the table-cloth like fingers trying to intertwine.

'I was offered a seat on the board of the bank,' Farrell confided. 'Soon after my wife died. I turned it down.'

Jennifer nodded in understanding. 'It isn't easy to face responsibility when you've lost someone you love.'

'I took time off. I sailed. I thought of going round the world, stupidly.' He looked back at himself, tolerant but not approving. 'We had a house in Henley. I sold it and took a place in Town when I got back to England. A service place, you know?'

'Yes – as much unlike your old home as possible?' She understood only too well. She had not been able to do that because of Barbara. 'Unlike you, I took my place on the board of Hammonds. It was given to me – I didn't expect it, I didn't *want* it.'

'You had, at least, a sort of legacy.'

'Yes.'

'I don't mean money.'

'I know what you mean, Martin,' she said.

'*I* had nothing. She was gone. Once the house was sold there was no trace of her.' His voice was quiet, and all the more telling because of that.

'I've had reminders all around me every day.'

'Yes.'

'Two extremes. Which is best, do you think?'

'I don't know,' he confessed. 'You think you'll never forget . . . yet sometimes I find it difficult to think back.'

'So do I.'

'I remember odd things.'

'Yes.' The tilt of Robert's head, the way he'd pick up a wine bottle to read every word of the label. . . . But where was the

real Robert, the man to whom she had given seventeen years?

'I've been out with one or two women since. Nothing very serious, though.' He smiled. 'At the bank, of course, it's all men. The City's a village. It's very easy to become embroiled.'

Jennifer took his empty *demi-tasse* and refilled it.

'Why me?' she asked with lightness as she handed it back.

'I don't know.' He studied her in the subdued light. A reposeful face, with straight brows over candid eyes. A tumble of soft light-brown hair. 'You're not a bit like Judith,' he acknowledged.

'Availability?' she suggested.

'No, not that.'

'Do you promise that wasn't the reason?'

'Yes.' His quick intuition caught at the question. 'Is that a tender spot?'

'It can be. For one thing, I like to think it isn't true. I don't want to believe that relationships evolve simply because people work in the same environment.'

'I agree. Relationships evolve because people have things in common. And chemistry comes into it.'

Jennifer didn't want to let the talk go any deeper. She had turned the conversation then, joking a little about the shooting party she'd heard had been suggested. She thought it pointless as a way of furthering business, and pulled his leg a little about it. That, in a way, was symptomatic of how their friendship progressed.

He noticed with some ironic amusement that, at a party in David Hammond's new flat, David's mother made a determined attempt to pair him off with Jennifer. Having put two and two together about a great many things, Farrell quite understood that Mary Hammond would be very glad to see Jennifer tied to some man outside the Hammond family. He had also seen how unhappy it made Edward.

One evening after the shooting party, Jennifer invited Martin to a meal at her flat. She felt she owed him a return for several very pleasant dinners in very elegant restaurants, and so she put herself out to provide a rather special meal.

'You're a woman of many talents,' he told her.

'Thank you, kind sir,' she said.

'One of your talents is . . . the ability to be somewhat self-contained. A bit elusive.'

She was about to laugh, 'Elusive? Me?' But he came up to where she was sitting on the long settee, sat down beside her, and leaning forward began to kiss her gently along her cheek-bone, moving back her hair from her cheek with a caressing movement.

She withdrew a little.

'You object?' he murmured.

'That shouldn't be a question,' she replied.

'Why not?'

'If you have to ask, it means you're not sure.'

'I'm not,' he confessed with a half-smile. He put his arm around her, but she got up.

'No, Martin.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know. . . .'

'You need to be in love?' he asked.

Jennifer sighed. 'I already am, I think.'

He too sighed, but not audibly. 'With Edward.'

'I didn't think you knew,' she said, surprise in her voice.

'Oh yes, you can't hide what you feel about someone, however much you try.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'Perhaps,' he said in a thoughtful tone, 'I shouldn't have intervened.'

'Oh no. It's over now. I'm quite free; he's quite free.'

He shook his head at her. 'But you still wish . . .?'

'Yes. I'm not quite as free as I thought,' she confesed.

'I don't think we ever are,' he agreed.

So they remained friends. He knew it was not likely it would go deeper. But to Edward, looking in at them from outside, it looked like a strong attachment – and one he had no right to resent.

The only brother who was completely happy was David. He and Jill were playing at housekeeping, fixing up the new flat. Then, as if to set the seal on her new status as Mrs David Hammond, ex-model-girl, Jill became pregnant. He found it a strange thought. A father? He tried the hat on for size and

wasn't altogether sure he'd intended to buy it – not yet, at any rate. Still, Junior was only an extra ounce or two on Jill's still-model-girl weight so there was no need to worry. He went on with a plan he'd long been cherishing: he took lessons in racing driving.

This was the only point on which they differed. Jill thought racing driving was dangerous. They had squabbles. But it always ended in her admitting that it was David's life and he had a right to risk it if he liked. And after the squabbles there was always the kissing and making up.

The 'business' graph was full of optimism. The directors of Hammonds met the directors of their merchant bank at the shoot arranged by Merroney, who turned out to be a crack shot. It all took place on a country estate in Dorset, and Edward thought it the daftest thing he'd ever taken part in, by way of a business get-together. But he acquitted himself well among the clay pigeons, as did Riley. Brian was hopeless. David almost didn't bother to try; he spent most of his time walking round hand in hand with his wife, Edward noticed – and he noticed the same tendency in Jenny and Martin Farrell.

But, as he admitted to himself, the object of the exercise was achieved. Sir Neville and the alarming Mr Bowman cast their eye over them and passed them A.1 at Lloyds so far as going public was concerned.

Bill Riley unexpectedly proved to be a great acquisition to the board. He went down well with Merroney at the shoot because, though not in the same class as that eagle-eyed marksman, he actually bagged a clay that Merroney missed. Mr Bowman was heard to make puffing congratulatory noises to Farrell about having 'workers' representation' on the team. But, best of all, Riley solved almost single-handed a very nasty problem that could have brought bad publicity to the firm just as, with the share issue about to be launched, they needed public approval.

A protest group formed itself in the street used by Hammonds' lorries as they left the depot fully loaded. Their accusation was based on environmental pollution; fumes, noise, vibration. Edward couldn't understand it. The firm's lorries had

been going down Lord Street for as long as he could remember and, in fact, some of his drivers lived there.

Edward met deputations, held little chats, even got his mother to have some of the housewives to tea. In days gone by, when his father had been struggling to build up Hammonds, his parents had lived in a terraced house just round the corner from Lord Street and Mary Hammond knew the women although they'd lost touch when she moved.

It became evident that the leader of the protest group was one Naylor, an out-of-work salesman living with his mother. It also became evident that Naylor wasn't in it for altruistic motives of saving the environment. Edward, alas, lost his temper with him.

He was horrified therefore to learn that Riley had interviewed this creep and accepted an application form from him for the quite-well-paid job of Traffic Controller.

'I won't have that two-faced little bastard on my payroll!' he roared.

'Don't worry, you won't,' Riley said, unperturbed. 'All I've accepted is an application form from him. I've a feeling I'll find him unsuitable for the post when I look it over. But then, y'see –' and he grinned '– he can hardly go on leading a protest against a firm he was willing to work for, can he?'

Edward stared at him in admiration. 'You old fox!' he said.

The trouble about environmental pollution was settled by a little give-and-take on both sides. Nothing got into the national press. And Hammond Transport Limited moved on confidently to the launch of their share issue.

Merroney had arranged for all the directors to meet representatives of pension funds and other potential investors of high standing at a sherry party to be given in the directors' lounge of the bank. He and Farrell fussed about inspecting glasses and pushing vases of flowers aside to make more room. This was as important to the two bank representatives as to Hammonds: Farrell had more or less thrown in his lot with the firm for the period of the launch, and Merroney's judgment as a financial expert was at stake. The big investors had to show an interest; if they took the bait, the small fry would follow.

'One before they arrive?' Merroney said, picking up a bottle of Amontillado gently to examine its label.

'Why not?' Farrell agreed. He was watching his colleague. Something was in the wind.

'The investment manager of Capital Investments Insurance has decided against buying Hammonds' shares,' Merroney remarked, sipping. 'He phoned this morning.'

Damn, thought Farrell. 'I thought we'd got him? Half a million at least.'

'So did I. Change of investment policy. He's not backing new issues for the time being.'

'I was rather relying on Capital,' Farrell murmured. 'It leaves us rather short of institutional backing.'

'And a bit late in the day. Still, if we can get the pension funds, we should be all right.'

'No reason why not.'

'Roger Clifton's the man to watch. He's a conservative old devil,' Merroney said, 'and if he bites, odds are the others will. So don't let your Hammond people behave like high flyers.' Merroney raised his hand to describe what he wanted. 'A steady yield and steady growth for the all-important shareholders – that's what Clifton likes to hear about.'

'Paul,' Farrell protested, 'the Hammond board are what they are. They can't behave like P.R. men. But they certainly aren't high flyers.'

Merroney nodded. 'Provided you're happy, I shall keep out of the way. This is your show.'

'All right, fine.'

When the directors of Hammonds were shown in, Farrell waved forward a waiter with a tray of sherry.

'What's this?' Riley asked, surprisingly at ease. 'A quick one before the off?'

Farrell gave him a momentary wink. Despite the difference in background, a sense of understanding had developed between these two based on mutual respect. He offered canapés to Jennifer and David; Brian shook his head. 'All right?' Farrell asked. Brian was a worry to him these days.

'What's the form?' asked Edward.

'There'll be four of them, each the investment manager of

a major pension fund: Mr Clifton, Mr Barrington, Mr Goodall and Mr Johnson.' He darted a glance, almost impish, at Jennifer. 'Expend a little charm on Barrington, will you, Jenny? He's susceptible.'

'How long will it go on for?' Edward said, not at all enjoying the rapport between Farrell and Jenny.

'An hour or so, not much more. Those who show an interest will follow up next day.'

The first to arrive was Clifton, brought in by Paul Merroney, who at once effaced himself. Clifton was tall, spare, white-haired and handsome – a power in the land and aware of it. Soon after him came Barrington, who made a bee-line for Jennifer. The other two arrived together. Within fifteen minutes the room was buzzing with conversation. Farrell shepherded his charges from one investor to the next, easing them into conversation and then out again. The one grouping he didn't disturb was Riley and Arnold Clifton. They had discovered, of all things, that they'd both served during the war in North Africa.

'Who was your C.O.?' Clifton asked, with real and eager interest.

'Colonel . . . oh, what was his name . . . Barker – no, Parker, that's it.'

'Tubby Parker?'

'Aye, that's right.'

'Good Lord,' Clifton said, pleased, 'do you realise we must have been in the same regiment? Well I'm damned!'

'But at opposite ends, you might say,' Riley reminded him, grinning. 'You'd be a sight above corporal, eh?'

'Captain. You were a corporal? And now you're a company director. Ah,' Clifton said, suppressing a sigh, 'things change. . . .' He quietly took in the details of Riley's appearance: neat dark suit, well laundered cotton shirt, quiet tie. 'As a new director, Mr Riley, how would you sum up Hammond Transport Services Ltd?'

What's he want, the Bible on a pin-head? thought Riley. But manfully he plunged in. 'I was a driver for a long, long time and I reckon I was a good one. I could have got a job anywhere. But I've stayed with Hammonds, driving lorries

until now, ever since I came out of the Army. I dunno if that gives you an idea of the kind of firm it is?'

'Yes,' said Clifton, 'thank you.'

Farrell stepped to the table from which the sherry was being served. 'Gentlemen . . . if I could have your attention please, gentlemen . . .?'

Rather reluctantly the groups turned their attention to him.

'Let me assure you that there's no cause for alarm,' Farrell said. 'I'm not going to make a speech. I just want to introduce the Chairman and Managing Director of Hammond Transport Services Ltd who would like to say a few words. Mr Hammond.'

Edward didn't really relish this task. He was no public orator nor had he any talent at what the Americans call 'a greeter'.

'Thank you, Mr Farrell,' he began. 'I don't want to say anything really, except to tell you, on behalf of my colleagues, that it's been a pleasure to meet you all, and to thank you for coming along.'

If he had stopped there, all might have been well. But it seemed too short so he floundered on. 'I happen to think Hammond Transport Services Ltd is a good company now, so I'm not going to promise any dramatic changes for the better. As a public company, it'll be run in exactly the same way. We shan't do anything differently, or see things differently.'

Hang on, thought David. Why are we going public if we're not going to change?

'Mr Hammond,' said Arnold Clifton.

'Yes?'

'I find what you've just said very interesting.'

'Thank you,' Edward said, missing the dryness.

'You say you can't promise any dramatic changes for the better. How do you equate that with the forecast of profits contained in the prospectus? Are you saying you have no personal faith in the growth expectations on which the shares issue is based?'

Yes, are you? Brian asked within himself. He could hear warning signals.

'Perhaps I could intervene here,' said Martin Farrell. 'What Mr Hammond meant was this—'

'Mr Farrell, with respect, I'd prefer to hear what Mr Hammond meant from his own lips.'

'I only want to point out that Mr Hammond is not expressing any doubts about the prospectus.' Which was a strong hint to Edward to watch what he was saying.

To some extent Clifton ignored him. 'I think we're entitled to assume that company policy is more accurately expressed by the Chairman and Managing Director, than by the company's advisers.'

Edward caught at the words 'company policy'. 'Growth *is* a company policy, Mr Clifton. We've grown a lot in the past and we hope to go on doing so.'

'Your share price, Mr Hammond, is pitched on expectations, not hopes. If all you have are hopes, your shares are overpriced.'

Farrell and Merroney exchanged glances. Clifton was in one of his nit-picking moods. Edward felt the same and expressed it. 'You're picking me up on words, Mr Clifton.'

'I assume that words express precise meanings, Mr Hammond. However, let us pass over a possible semantic difference between us. You say that your company would be managed in exactly the same way?'

'Quite right.'

Paul Merroney frowned and, taking out a small notebook, began to write.

'Do you see no difference between operating as a private company, and as a public company?' Clifton pursued.

'We shall be doing exactly the same things – shifting goods from A to B, maintaining vehicles, running depots and warehouses.'

'And the shareholders?'

'They'll get their dividends and, we hope, a capital gain as well.'

'To ensure that, should not the company be operated in the shareholders' interests?'

'Well, to some extent perhaps,' said Edward. 'It depends.'

It was almost possible to hear everyone holding their breath.

'Mr Hammond,' Clifton said, 'you and your co-directors will not be sole owners of the company. You will be paid managers, on behalf of the shareholders.'

'I'm sorry, I couldn't go that far.'

Clifton's silvery head lifted. 'If I am to be asked to consider investing in your company on behalf of my fund, I'd very much like to know just where the shareholders come in your scale of priorities.'

'They come where they belong, Mr Clifton,' Edward said pugnaciously. '*They* don't work on the loading bays. They don't drive a heavy lorry on crowded roads a thousand miles a week. They invest money to make money. All right, fine! – we'll try and give them a fair return.' He saw Clifton give a disdainful smile as if to say 'Very kind of you, I'm sure,' and grew even angrier. 'But if you're asking me if I'd ever put the shareholders above the men who sweat their guts out for this company, who depend on us for the rent and the groceries, the answer's no. If I ever had to make a choice, I wouldn't give a damn about the shareholders.'

When it was clear that Edward had finished, Clifton said with exquisite politeness, 'Thank you, Mr Hammond, for giving us the benefit of your views.' To his friend Barrington he said, 'I have another appointment, Tom – I don't know about you.'

'Yes, I must get on, I suppose,' Barrington said with an apologetic smile at Jennifer.

Merroney had moved unnoticed round the edge of the group to reach Edward, who was pouring himself a much-needed glass of sherry. 'Mr Hammond, some of these people may have misunderstood what you said. I think you ought to say a few more words. I've drafted the sense of it.'

He showed his notebook to Edward who, taken by surprise, began to read the angular writing.

Tom Barrington said goodbye to Jennifer and gave her hand a kindly pat. 'Buy your chairman a muzzle, Miss Kingsley, that's my advice.'

'But he only meant—'

Barrington shook his head, moving away. 'We have to be careful, Miss Kingsley. We're investing not for ourselves but for other people.'

Merroney was watching Edward read his notes. 'Put it your own way, of course,' he urged. 'I'll tell them you want to clarify—'

'Don't bother,' Edward grunted. 'I've finished.'

'Mr Hammond, they're leaving. There isn't time to argue.'

'Look, sonny,' Edward said in a hard voice, 'I said exactly what I meant.' He thrust the notebook back into his hands. 'If you think I'm going to back down on your say-so, you must be out of your mind!'

When Riley recounted all this to his wife, Gwen was highly amused. 'I wish I could have seen their faces,' she chuckled.

'It's not funny, Gwen.'

'What, all those stuffed shirts being told where they got off? I'd have thought you'd be the first to agree with him, Bill.'

'Well, yes, in a way, but we've got to sell the shares if we're going public. The men've already been promised a fatter wage packet, but doing a hearts-and-flowers to the wrong people about the grocery bill is more likely to put 'em out of a job.'

Gwen heard him out in surprise. 'You're beginning to think differently, Bill. This new arrangement's changing you.'

'Mr Edward put up a real black today if you ask me,' Riley said, pursuing his own thoughts. And then, belatedly hearing what Gwen had said: 'Me? Changing? I've not changed. Don't talk so daft.'

Next day came the post mortem. Martin Farrell had to try to get Edward to repair the damage he'd done. What worried him more than anything was that Edward didn't realise he was in the wrong.

'If a bunch of stiffnecked idiots can't stand being told the facts of life—'

'Ted, they're not idiots. They're hard-headed investment managers, quick on the uptake. You didn't mean—'

'I meant exactly what I said!'

'Hand over your money and I'll do what I like with it, and damn you, it's none of your business?'

'That's not what I meant and it's not what I said,' Edward growled.

'That's how it sounded. Paul Merroney is extremely concerned about it.'

'Merroney? What the devil has it got to do with him?' His phone rang and he picked it up. 'Yes? Who? Clive Jameson? What does he want? Well . . . put him through.'

'Ted, don't talk to him,' Farrell said.

'What?' Edward said, astonished. Into the phone he said, 'Speaking. Yes?'

'Tell him to hold on.'

'Why?'

Farrell put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone, pulling it away from Edward's face. 'Tell him,' he commanded, then he took his hand away.

Impressed despite himself, Edward obeyed. 'Hang on a minute, will you, Mr . . . er . . . Jameson.' He in his turn put his hand over the phone. 'What's the matter?'

'Clive Jameson is an extremely able financial journalist. If it's about yesterday, don't say anything.'

'He can't know about that?'

Oh, can't he! thought Farrell. 'If he does, you've nothing to say.'

Edward said into the phone: 'Hello? Sorry about that, Mr Jameson. What can I do for you?'

'I wondered, Mr Hammond,' said the voice at the other end, 'if I could have some information about your meeting with the investment managers yesterday?'

'I'm sorry,' Edward said, 'I can't discuss it at present. I'm in a meeting.'

'Could I see you later today?'

'I'll be busy all day.'

'Tomorrow, then?'

'I'm sorry, I don't know when I'll be available. This is a busy period, as you know. No, I'm sorry, Mr Jameson, I can't talk on the phone – there are people here. Sorry. Goodbye.' He hung up, then lifted the receiver, and said to the switch-

board girl: 'Judy, if Mr Jameson rings back, I'm out.' To Farrell he said, 'That was a private meeting. How did he get on to it?'

'The City's like a sort of club, Ted. People talk. . . .'

Ted couldn't be brought to believe that the newspapers would really be interested in anything he had said It took the appearance of a paragraph in the financial section of his morning paper to convince him he'd pulled a boner. The report quoted verbatim his remark that he would not give a damn for the shareholders and concluded: 'It will be interesting to see what the market makes of this fighting talk when the value of the company comes to be assessed.'

Paul Merroney set up a press conference for that afternoon. He was as near angry as he ever allowed himself to be when Edward tried to jib. He might have been even angrier – or perhaps just amused – to learn that on being told he was to go to a press conference and read a prepared statement, Edward had rung the Chairman of the bank asking that this bright young whizz kid should be told to stop behaving as if he ran the show.

Sir Neville Grant was not an unkind man, but he felt it was time Edward Hammond learned the economic facts of life. 'Paul Merroney cannot be removed from the scene, Mr Hammond. He represents the bank, who are your underwriters.'

'But surely Martin Farrell—?'

'Martin is an excellent man, in whom I have complete confidence. But Paul is our representative, acting from *our* side to bring the share issue to a successful launch. I cannot withdraw him even if I wished, Mr Hammond.'

The press conference was held. Edward read Merroney's statement, suitably amended into something more like Edward's style with help from Jennifer. Whether it did any good remained to be seen.

Only Ann Hammond failed to read about her brother-in-law's *faux pas*. She never looked at the financial columns. Indeed she never opened the newspaper at all these days, not even at

the fashion page. Her entire being was concentrated on the problem of winning and keeping Nick.

She had learned what she ought perhaps to have known already: that to drive Brian away didn't necessarily mean that Nick would rush in to take his place. He remained as ever – aloof and elusive; in some subtle way, more so, because he had begun to paint again.

There was irony in the fact that he had gone back to painting after Brian told him Hammonds would no longer be requiring his advertising services. Nicholas had been struck by the thought that to be subject to the whims of men like Brian Hammond was not a very fulfilling career for a serious artist. He hadn't yet chucked in his hand as an advertising executive but he was giving more and more of his spare time to the easel.

Even when he wasn't painting, Ann had seen little of him. His firm had sent him to Paris for a week, then to Stockholm, and to Amsterdam. Unable to bear the loneliness, she had followed him to Amsterdam. He had not been pleased. It wasn't that he was doing anything he didn't want her to know about – she could see he was alone as soon as she walked into his hotel room. He simply didn't want her there.

Worst of all – or perhaps not worst but strangest – was Virginia. Ann arrived at Nick's studio one night soon after Brian had left her. As she stepped out of the lift she was met by a pale, quiet, good-looking woman who studied her openly for a moment before ushering her into the flat as if she belonged there.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'There's no contention.'

Ann looked at her in perplexity.

'I sometimes like to see his latest,' the other woman went on, 'out of curiosity.'

'Am I his latest?' Ann asked coldly.

'Aren't you? I wouldn't say you look as if you're here on business. But play it that way if you—'

'Now just a minute! Do you know where he is?'

'No, but I'm expecting him to ring. Won't you sit down?'

Strangely hypnotised by the situation, Ann did so. 'Do you often come here?' she demanded. 'To his studio?'

'It's mine, actually,' she said. 'It belongs to me. I'm Virginia Fox.'

'Oh. . . .'

'You knew he was married?'

'I thought he was divorced.'

'Oh yes. Twice.'

'Then you are—?'

'His second.'

So began the strangest relationship Ann had ever entered into in her life. Virginia Fox had a good reason for visiting her ex-husband; she had been an artist, was now an art agent, and handled Nick's work. But though she tried very hard not to show it, the reason she kept contact with Nick was because she still loved him, not because she admired his work. In fact, she did *not* admire it.

'He used to be an artist,' she mused one afternoon, studying his latest canvas while Ann stood by. 'But it's gone. Now he makes impressive designs in paint.'

Ann, who knew little about it, had always believed in Nick's talent. But she was sure Virginia knew what she was talking about. 'Will it come back?' she asked eagerly.

'It's too much of a game with him. When he can't face up to things, when everything goes wrong – he's a painter.'

Ann's heart sank.

'He feeds off a situation. He's done four good canvases in the last fortnight. You must be having some effect,' Virginia said.

'Are you going to be able to sell this?'

'It's already sold. Three hundred pounds. A hundred and fifty for that smaller one against the wall.'

'A lot of money.'

'They're an investment. He's an investment,' she said. 'That's how I've come to look on him.'

It was the strangest state of affairs, intensely complex, defying analysis. They weren't exactly friends but they were certainly not enemies. Ann sensed that Virginia was both envious of her and sorry for her: envious because Ann now had Nick's love, sorry for her because past experience told her his love would not last.

Ann for her part liked Virginia, but she feared her. This woman had been married to Nick. The marriage was over, but not Nick's need of her.

Brian came to his house one evening to collect a few more belongings. They were guardedly polite to each other, on Ann's side even absent-minded. She was waiting for a phone call from Nick. Brian came downstairs at last with a suitcase, set it down, then took from his breast pocket an envelope containing cash which he laid on the table.

'I'm starting divorce proceedings,' he said.

She heard him but it scarcely registered. She was listening for the phone. Nick was abroad again; days had gone by since she had last seen him.

Nick rang to say he would be back next day. She went to his studio to give him a welcome-home party, but he took a later plane because of business delays and the food was spoilt by the time he came in, tired and edgy.

'Shall I run you a bath?' she asked, watching him take off coat, jacket and tie.

'No, thanks.'

'I had a risotto ready but it's gone all dry.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Aren't you going to say you're pleased to see me?'

'Of course.' He stalked to the drinks counter and poured himself a brandy. 'One for you, I suppose?'

She frowned. 'You manage to make that sound like an offer I can't refuse.'

He gave her a drink then flopped down on a chair across the room from her.

'You've got that look on your face again,' she said.

'What look?'

'That hounded, haunted, hunted look. I shouldn't be here, should I?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'I shouldn't have gone to Amsterdam after you either. I'm sorry. I'm a possessive bitch but I can't help it.' She sighed. 'Brian used to be like that. He didn't like to let me out of his sight. I had to tell him about it. So he made a big effort and

left me more or less free to do what I liked. That was worse, somehow. I was always conscious of all this freedom he had given me.'

'You should go back to Brian.'

She drew in her breath, in fear. 'I can't go back. I don't want to go back. I'm staying with you.'

'I'm not going to be any use to you. I'm just trying to tell you what's best.'

'I don't care, Nick.'

'You will,' he said.

'No, as long as I'm of use to you, that's all I want. You've begun to paint again because of me. If I can just be that much to you ... I've never felt like this before, Nick. I've never wanted to give.'

'What happens,' he asked cruelly, 'when you're no longer any use?'

'If that happens. ...'

'You'll just go, then – will you?'

'Yes.'

'I don't believe you, Ann,' he said. He sounded very tired. 'I think you should go now. I'm not going to marry you, you do understand that?'

She made a quick gesture of dismissal as if to say, 'It doesn't matter.'

'I'm going to bed.' He got up, set his glass down, and moved towards the stairs.

'You're not going to leave me down here, are you?' she pleaded.

He put his arms round her. 'I'd like to,' he said. She clung fiercely to him, he simply allowed it to happen. 'But that would take strength of character,' he ended as they put their feet on the stairs.

Next day he went to see Brian at David's flat. It was a move of desperation. He and Ann had had yet another row, a silly, futile argument over some photographs she'd found of his first and his second wives. He could see no end to it; she wasn't like other women he had known, who could be cut loose by calculated indifference or bruised by cruelty. No matter what he did, Ann would not let go.

Brian was almost incredulous when he opened the door and found him there. He grew even more so as he heard Nicholas ask him to take her back. He described a woman they both knew didn't exist: missing her children, regretting the past.

'She's never missed the children,' Brian said calmly. 'She isn't interested in them. If she's had a sudden fit of conscience she knows where they are and she can visit them, as I do.'

'She tells me you're taking divorce proceedings.'

'Yes.'

'That isn't necessary. I've told her there's no future for her with me.'

'There is no future for her with me,' Brian said in his turn. 'I'm not divorcing her just because she's in the middle of an affair with you at this moment. I'm not going to change my mind because the affair ends.'

'Then what's it *for*, Brian?'

Brian looked at the perplexed, handsome face. 'You wouldn't understand,' he said.

Nicholas had done all he could. For him, what he had done was a great deal. Now there was only one thing left. He broke it to Ann that same day, a Saturday.

'I'm going to New York,' he said.

'What? When?'

'On Monday.'

'Monday?' She had gone chalk-white. 'For how long?'

'I don't know.'

'Can't the firm give you any idea?'

'I'm not going for the firm. I've written them a letter of resignation. I'm going on my own initiative, indefinitely.'

She gathered herself to rebuff this attack. 'I can get a visa at the American Embassy on Monday morning and—'

'You're not coming, Ann.'

She had known that when he began to speak. 'I don't understand what I've done,' she faltered.

'Nothing.'

'You can't leave me. I love you. I want to be with you always.'

'It's no good.'

'But why?'

'Ann, I didn't ask you to leave Brian.'

'He left me.'

'You caused it. He didn't have much choice. Then you came here and *I* didn't have much choice.'

'You wanted me.'

'Yes, I did.'

'You damn well wanted me!' she cried. 'And now for some reason you don't. You're working, you're painting, you're going here and there, Paris, Amsterdam. Now it's New York and goodbye. Why? Why?'

'I don't know,' he said. He was looking at her but she could read nothing in his eyes. 'It's happened before.'

'I left my husband for you, Nick. My home, my children.'

'You can go back.'

'I don't want to go back.'

'I don't care where you go,' he told her.

'I'm staying here!'

'Stay. The lease is paid till the New Year. I shall be in New York.'

She battered at him with words. 'Tell me what I've done. You don't have to marry me. You're being cruel. You have to give me a reason.' On and on. She couldn't believe it would have no effect.

By and by he ceased to argue. She began to tell him it would all be all right, that everyone had these silly fights. She knelt by him, her cheek against his hand, loving him, telling herself that if she loved him enough that would solve everything.

After some time he said he must ring Virginia. She said, 'I'll leave you then,' and went upstairs. She changed quickly into a filmy negligée, a wisp of lace and silk brought back from Paris. Barefoot, she went halfway down the stairs. Nicholas was replacing the phone.

'Nick,' she called softly.

He didn't even look up. 'I'm going out for a walk,' he said, 'I'll be back in an hour or so.'

She sat on the stairs a long time waiting for him. Finally she crept up to the bedroom and dragged herself between the sheets.

When she came down in the morning he was there, drink-

ing coffee. She couldn't guess whether he'd just come in or had slept downstairs on the day bed. 'I'm going first thing tomorrow,' he said. 'I don't want you here when I go.'

'But, Nick . . . what shall I do?'

'Go back to your own house.'

'Let me stay until tomorrow morning,' she begged.

'No. Virginia is coming.'

'Why?'

'Business. We need to talk about quite a lot.'

'Well, I can still stay. I don't mind you talking.'

'No.'

'I'm not going to leave, Nick!'

'If you insist on staying. . . .'

'You'd throw me out?' she challenged. 'You'd actually do that?'

'I'll take a flight going today, instead.'

He won. He was bound to win. He had had practice, and besides he had no such weakness as love to hamper him.

She walked out. She didn't even pack her belongings that were upstairs in the bedroom. She went down in the lift and out to the street, where Sunday was unrolling itself in a ribbon of cold somnolence, people taking dogs to the park, paper sellers at the Tube station entrance, church bells. She walked until she was tired.

Then she called a taxi. 'Where to, miss?'

Where to, indeed. Not home – 'home' to the house Brian had bought. Not yet. She couldn't face it yet, its emptiness, its loneliness.

'London Airport,' she said.

She sat in the airport lounge the rest of that day and all night. When Flight 502 was called on Monday morning she watched the passengers heading for the gate.

She saw Nicholas. He was with Virginia. They went on their way to the plane arm in arm and though she waited she did not see Virginia come back. They had gone together to New York.

CHAPTER NINE

STRANGE to say, the person to whom Ann turned was Jill. She had no friends of her own, no relatives except her parents to whom it was impossible to explain. She went to Jill, who put her to bed for twenty-four hours and looked after her through the period of physical and psychological shock.

Those twenty-four hours taught Ann a lot. Jill's happiness in her marriage and in her pregnancy was like a shining example of what Ann had thrown away. Moreover, when she returned to her own house Ann realised that she wasn't good at living alone. She needed someone there, not only to admire her and look after her, but to assure herself that she existed. If there was no one to react to, then how did you live your life? She was not the kind of person with 'inner resources'; she didn't even know what they were. When there was no longer even Jill to say 'Really?' or 'Don't think about it', she found herself reduced to switching on the radio to hear a human voice, and switching it off again to assure herself that she had power to alter something.

When Brian came again, this time to make an inventory of the house contents, she set herself to be very reasonable, very co-operative. Brian explained that when the divorce went through they would need this inventory so as to make an amicable division of household goods; inwardly frightened, she nodded calmly but asked where she was supposed to live if the home were sold.

'And what about the children?' she added, hoping it did not sound like an afterthought.

'I assumed you'd go and stay with your parents until you could make your own arrangements.'

She said, with a pathos that wasn't entirely calculated: 'I'm not used to coping on my own. I've always had you to turn to.' That didn't have as much effect as she'd hoped so she went on: 'We've been married a long time, Brian. Do we have to make so many decisions so quickly? We're both emo-

tional at the moment – couldn't we approach it a little more gradually?'

'My solicitor made a similar suggestion,' he admitted.

'What did he say?'

'That it might be best to leave it for the two years and see how we both felt then.'

She brightened. Two years! In that time she could achieve almost anything she wanted with Brian. 'Perhaps we should consider that.'

'Unless, he added, either of us urgently wanted to remarry. I told him that I didn't but that you did.'

'That's not so, Brian!' she protested. 'I'm not seeing Nick any more. It's all over between us.'

He didn't tell her that Nick had been to see him, trying to get rid of her by handing her back to her husband. He listened almost without comment to her plea that they should take time to think.

When he left she was pretty sure she had kept her options open. Poor Brian! It was so easy to make him see there were two sides to every question.

But that comfortable illusion was shattered for her four days later when a quiet, imperturbable man appeared on her doorstep presenting a card which informed her that his name was Prescott, a partner in a firm of private investigators.

'I've been asked to call on you by your husband's solicitors, Mrs Hammond.'

Her first reaction was irrational anger. 'I have nothing to say to you, Mr Prescott. Please go.'

'Shall we make an appointment for some more convenient occasion?'

'There won't be a convenient occasion.' He had stepped into the hall and she now indicated the still-open front door.

'Do you intend to contest the divorce, Mrs Hammond?'

'That's my business.'

'If you propose to deny the allegation of adultery with Mr Nicholas Fox, you'll have to appear in court when certain evidence—'

'What evidence?'

'May I come in so that we can discuss it? You might find it helpful.'

She had calmed down sufficiently now to want to know what he meant by 'evidence'. It had never really occurred to her hitherto that there could be 'evidence', that anyone could really know anything that would stand up in a court of law.

But, after some verbal fencing, she let Prescott give her a summary of the case against her. Dates, times, places. Witnesses. Even that first time, that episode of magical coming-together in the summerhouse at Anthony Bromley's swimming pool – even then, there had been a gardener who saw them, who had identified her from a photograph.

Ann was nauseated. It made her feel dirty. What to her had been the deepest emotional experience of her life was made to seem grubby. For one micro-second of blinding clarity she saw how it must all look to others – to Brian, perhaps even to Jill who had not uttered one word of censure.

The fight went out of her. She would not contest. She agreed to make a statement which could be produced in evidence, and under Prescott's guidance dictated and signed it.

Mary Hammond didn't approve of divorce, didn't relish having one in the family. Brian had come to dinner with her and Edward that evening, not an entirely enjoyable meal since both her sons seemed worried about the share issue on Hammonds although they assured her otherwise. Brian seemed to want to escape at the first possible moment. As he kissed her goodnight she reminded him that he was always welcome, adding: 'Have you decided yet?'

'About what?'

'Ann.'

'I told you all about that before.'

'Divorce?'

'Yes.'

'I wondered how you felt now that some time had gone by.'

'The same.'

'I'm not sure that Ann wants a divorce,' she objected.

His face was like stone. 'What she wants doesn't come into it.'

'Brian, I'm not defending Ann. It may well be that you'd be happier with someone else.'

'That's the last thing I'm thinking about,' he said with distaste.

'But you must think of the children, Brian. If there was a possibility that one day you might forgive her—'

'Forgiveness doesn't come into it. I can't live with what's happened.'

'Brian!' she exclaimed, deeply distressed. 'Try not to be bitter. You can't act the injured party for the rest of your life.'

'Why not, Mother?' he said in a hard voice. 'You have.'

'Brian!' she gasped.

'Goodnight, Ted,' he said, and went out.

Mary sank down on a nearby chair. 'Edward . . . that's not how I seem? What Brian said? I'm not . . . like that, am I?'

Her eldest son looked at her with pity Had she only just realised it? 'A part of you is like that, yes.' She made a little sound of protest but he said: 'Have you ever tried to forgive Jennifer? Or even to understand her?'

'That was different.'

'How? Because it happened to you?'

She sat silent, looking down at her hands. Then she said slowly, 'I haven't clearly understood until now what I was doing. I thought my feelings, my anger, were private, affecting only me. But tonight I've seen that it isn't so.'

'I don't see—?'

'Brian isn't divorcing Ann because their marriage can't be made to work. He's doing it for revenge, and I've shown him how to do it, how bitterness can be a power. I've played my part in teaching him – and now he can rightly use me to justify himself.'

The following Monday the advertisement to the public of shares in Hammond Transport Services Ltd appeared. Mary studied it over breakfast and remarked that it looked most impressive. She didn't mention the terrible fall in the Financial Times Shares Index for the previous Friday's trading on the Stock Exchange.

Neither did Edward. A fall like that was never likely to hap-

pen again. Some City bigwig having kittens over the balance of payments, probably. He didn't know, and only found out in the evening paper, that during Saturday and Sunday when the market was closed private trading had continued and the fall had gone further by Monday morning. By the evening another four points had gone.

Paul Merroney came into Farrell's office with a piece torn off the Telex read-out. 'Hammonds could be in difficulty now, Martin.'

'There will be an upturn, Paul. It can't go on like this.'

'Think not? I was in Paris last night, dining with Chelindot. He says he doesn't think the buyers will come back until it reaches 220.'

Farrell raised his eyebrows. 'Come, come. The level hasn't been down that low for about fifteen years.'

'You know how hysterical the Stock Exchange gets. Once it begins to believe a fall in shares is inevitable, it produces a fall.' He sighed. 'That's no climate for a new issue.'

'No one could have foreseen this,' Farrell said.

'No, but now we have to deal with it. I wonder if Hammonds will find any buyers?'

One or two, yes. Jill Hammond had made up her mind weeks ago that the moment the prospectus was available she was going to invest the remainder of the money left to her by her father in Hammond Transport Services Ltd. She didn't explain her reasons to David but they were twofold. First, the investment was a sort of thank-you to Providence for all the good things that had happened: David's deepening love for her, their expected baby, and the fact that because of him (or her), David had decided to give up racing. He had made his debut as a Ford Formula driver at Oulton Park a month ago, an event which she had stoically endured. He came tenth, which for a debut was pretty good. The next day Jill had a slight fainting fit and David nearly lost his reason from sheer anxiety.

'How do you think *I* feel when you go whizzing round a racing circuit?' she muttered into his shoulder as he hugged her close.

So, having proved he could do it if he wanted to, he gave it up. 'The briefest career in racing history,' he announced.

The other reason for Jill's investment was to get rid of the money. It had always irked David that she was rich; she guessed that he couldn't forget how badly Hammonds had needed her money when he married her. Poor darling – it took him months to sort himself out on that one and there had still been a hang-over from it when she bought the penthouse. Now there was a good deal less money than there had been, but still a substantial sum all the same.

She went with him to the boardroom at the depot to get a prospectus and fill it in.

'Darling, at least keep half of it in blue chips,' he begged as she got out her pen and sat down at the boardroom table.

She shook her head at him. 'Some pregnant women develop a taste for eating coke, or ice-cream with tomato sauce. *I* feel like buying Hammond shares.'

David appealed to Brian, who came in at that moment. 'Talk some sense into her, Brian! She's putting in all her money.'

But though Brian explained that she should have a balanced portfolio, it made no difference. Mary Hammond also brought some although, being older and wiser, she didn't sink every penny. Gwen Riley felt she must back her husband's company so she too invested – heavily, in the context of their financial situation; she took out all the money Bill Riley had invested for her in a building society, and bought Hammond Transport Services shares.

Tuesday the market was down again, Wednesday yet another seven points lower. On Thursday Merroney and Farrell knew that the Stock Exchange slide was going to go down beyond the 220 prophesied by the French broker; in this climate no one was going to buy Hammond Transport Services unless they were shown surpassingly good reason for doing so.

'Have you any figures yet?' Farrell asked.

'Only a quarter of the issue was taken up. Three-quarters left with the under-writers.'

'That bad, Paul!'

'Most of the institutional backing didn't materialise, which

was a pity, because if they had bought we'd have slipped past the post before this toboggan-ride began.' He was in Farrell's office, wandering about as he often did, and stopped to look with absent dislike at the Dutch still-life. 'We're left holding a somewhat expensive baby, Martin.'

'Mm. . . . Once confidence comes back, buyers may want the shares,' Farrell said on a note of muted optimism

'Adopt a policy of masterly inactivity? It might work, there might be some interest. But –' he turned his back on the still-life to look at Farrell '–with three-quarters of the shares left on our hands they're bound to open at a discount.'

'It depends how large a discount.'

'Yes. Need I tell you what will influence that?' Merroney asked. 'Well, it's your baby, Martin. You're the doctor.'

When dealing began, the price of Hammond Transport Services went down from fifty pence at opening to thirty-five pence by mid-afternoon. David was almost beside himself. 'I did warn you!' he said to Jill. 'Now you've lost thirty per cent of your money.'

'I've only lost it if I want to sell the shares,' she said surprisingly, 'and I *don't* want to sell them. I bought them as an investment.'

'There's quite a chance you could find you've invested in something else.'

'What do you mean?'

'This could make us very vulnerable to a take-over bid.'

'That's impossible, darling. You and the other directors still hold sixty per cent of the shares – it's only the public forty per cent that's available.'

'That was a good defence in the old days when a director could only sell with the consent of his co-directors. But now we've gone public, it only needs one of us to sell out—' He broke off as he saw the quizzical look in his wife's eye. 'Not me, darling. I've got a son and heir to think of now. I'll stick to Hammonds come hell or high water!'

Martin Farrell gave it one more day. Hammond Transport shares went down to twenty-nine pence but came up by close of dealing to thirty-one. Merroney, consulted on the phone,

said his contact on 'Change said he thought it would bottom out at thirty-two and a half. But it was essential, Farrell knew, to get investors to take them up at that price. Something had to be done to show the City that at thirty-two and a half pence a share, Hammonds was a good buy.

Farrell invited Edward to dinner at his restaurant in Hampstead where the food was good and the surroundings quiet. He made no attempt to keep from talking shop; quite the contrary, he allowed the conversation to move in and out of the problems facing the company, answering Edward's questions with brevity and clarity.

Edward felt himself to be in a strange mood. He was angry, but not in a way that was familiar to him; generally when something went wrong he lost his temper, said a few swear-words, and felt better. But the anger that was consuming him now was something from which he wasn't going to recover – not for a long time.

They had taken his company – *his* company – and put it up in the market place like some poor old slave-girl. The dealers had come, pinched her arms, examined her teeth, and said she wasn't much good.

He didn't blame Martin Farrell much, or even Paul Merroney. They had set up the stand and provided the slave-merchant: 'Walk up, walk up, a fine steady working servant!' They had done what they'd been asked to do.

His brothers were to blame. He had told them and *told* them: Hammonds wasn't the kind of firm that should go public. But they knew best, oh, they knew best! They'd even talked Jenny round.... Well, there were special reasons for that.

But it was no good thinking about blame now This was the root of his anger. He couldn't lash out at anyone and feel better. The company was dying. The poor old slave-girl stood in the market-place, head hanging, fingers twisting against her worn apron. Nobody wanted her.

'So we're in trouble,' he said to Farrell.

'We have a problem.'

'You don't think the shares will go up again?'

Farrell sighed inwardly. Couldn't the man see that the

shares not only would not go up, but would hang fire for ever if something wasn't done?

'You're going to have to trust me,' he said.

'I do,' Edward said. 'Of course I do.' Strange, that. It wasn't the kind of thing he'd ever imagined himself saying to the man who was taking Jenny away from him – but it was so.

'The confidence of the City is a delicate thing – almost intangible – but we have to gain it. The men whose business is money don't trust Hammonds. We need their trust.' He paused before saying in a low, quiet voice: '*We must have it.*'

'Go on.'

'I hate having to put this to you, Ted. I've come to think very highly of you, and if there was some other way . . . but if there is, I don't know of it.'

'What are you trying to say?'

'I want to suggest that you stand down as Chairman and Managing Director.'

There followed a long, long silence. The two men sat at opposite sides of the table, the trappings of civilised living around them: but it was a combat, the Roman arena, swordsman versus net-and-trident.

'You want a fall guy,' Edward said at length. 'Someone to carry the can.'

Farrell allowed himself to seem to fall back a step. 'If you like, yes.'

'So that you can say to your precious friends in the City, "Well, of course it was Edward Hammond who messed things up, antagonised everybody, said damn the shareholders." '

'In a bull market your retraction would have done the trick, but we've been faced with a falling market.'

'And who do you propose as the new Chairman to impress the City? Paul Merroney? Sir Neville? You, perhaps?'

'We need a figurehead who will carry conviction to them. You'll still be on the board, you needn't suffer any financial loss, we'll still be using your talents in the actual running of the company.' Farrell still kept his tone quiet, but put urgency into it. 'All right, if we put someone else in your chair it's a façade but we need it.'

'Who's we? Hammonds? Or your merchant bank?'

'Both.'

'Right,' Edward said. Now he had found someone to lash out at. 'I'll give you my answer. No.'

'Ted, at least think about it,' Farrell begged. 'You may find this hard to believe, but I'm trying to preserve the company in one piece. If you'll stand down, I think that can be achieved.'

Edward had been taking out his wallet as Farrell spoke. He said: 'To you that's all Hammond Transport is – just another company. Not for me.' He shook his head. 'For me it's everything I've lived for.' He threw two five-pound notes on the table between them and got up. 'That'll take care of my half of the bill.'

'Ted,' Farrell said, for the first time allowing his voice to rise a fraction. 'I can't take no for an answer. I can't leave it at that.'

Edward understood him. He leaned towards him over the table. 'If you think you can get me voted out, Mr Martin Farrell, you try, and good luck. You'll need it.'

Farrell watched him stride away. He knew he had handled it badly But how was it possible to handle it well when you were asking a man to throw his life away?

It was necessary to move quickly. The very next morning Farrell got to the depot early and waited in the car park for Brian to arrive. He got into Brian's car and explained the situation. Brian had already worked it out for himself so that only a few words were needed between them.

'I'm sorry Brian,' Farrell said, 'to solicit your support against your own brother.'

'I'm sorry too,' Brian said with a sigh.

As they got out of the car at the end of the conversation he glanced up. His brother Ted was watching him from the flat roof of the depot. Their eyes met for a moment before Ted turned away.

Riley was busy as usual in the traffic office when Edward came in. He could see trouble was brewing by one look at Edward's face.

'Everything all right, Bill?'

'Running like clockwork, Mr Hammond.'

'I told you once there'd be a real battle one day, didn't I?'

'You did.'

'It's coming up, Bill, and I want you there on my side.' With a nod of emphasis, Ted went away.

It almost made Riley grin when, not ten minutes later, young Mr David came in. 'Bill, I want you and your wife to come to my place for drinks tonight. It's important.'

Riley didn't much relish the invitation but there seemed no way out. 'Righto, Mr Hammond.'

Gwen was really quite keen to go. She wanted to see a penthouse, which was the kind of place she'd read about in American detective stories but had never actually seen. It proved to be a rooftop flat in a very expensive block, but the interior was furnished in a pleasant mixture of old and new that kept Gwen and Jill chatting while the men got on with the important things.

'I had a session with Martin Farrell today,' David began.

'Oh, aye?'

David said nothing, allowing the silence to turn Riley's taciturn manner into a lever by which he could be moved.

'He's talked to me too,' Riley admitted grudgingly.

'I thought he might have done.' David lay back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. 'I don't like it, Bill.'

'Nor do I,' said Riley.

Jennifer Kingsley liked it even less when she heard. Martin Farrell took her out to dinner – the same restaurant to which he'd taken Edward, and where he and Jennifer were now quite well-known to the waiters.

'If I come here any oftener, I shall begin to feel we own the place,' Jennifer said with a giggle.

'I said to Edward . . . this is where I bring special people.'

'Edward's been here?' she said, surprised.

'Didn't he tell you?'

'No.'

'Ted is so damn straight and honest, it hurts,' Farrell said, looking away.

'Martin . . . is something going on? I have had the feeling all day. . . .'

'I'm afraid it's been a day of subterranean activity,' he said,

trying for lightness. 'I've felt obliged to put it to Edward that he should stand down as Chairman and Managing Director.'

Jennifer's very heart went cold. So that had been the reason for Edward's set expression, his brusqueness when she wanted to discus a Channel ferry hold-up.

'Would you explain to me,' she said, her chin beginning to jut, 'what right you think you have to do that?'

'Jenny! It's got to be done if Hammond Transport isn't to go down the drain. Believe me, I've tried to think of some other way out.' He sketched for her the picture of the Stock Exchange's coldness to the shares, Merroney's instructions that the underwriters – the merchant bank – would expect remedial action, and Edward's reaction.

Jennifer heard him out in silence. Then she said: 'Would you ask the waiter to phone for a cab, please?'

'Jenny, I can easily run you home!'

'I'd rather go by taxi, thank you.'

'All right,' he said, understanding that the move to get rid of the Chairman was going to cost him something in personal terms. 'As you wish.'

'Martin,' she said, relenting a little, 'you've been honest and straightforward and you haven't gone behind Edward's back. For that I respect you. But I hate the way you're attacking Edward.'

'I'm not attacking him in any personal sense.'

'But that's what your arguments leave out! The personal element.'

'I have to think of the company first.'

'The company *is* Edward Hammond.'

'Not any more.'

She shook her head at him. 'There have been times when I've disagreed with Edward, when I thought he was wrong and joined with the others to vote him down. But if you really thought I would join with you to make him give up his job —! Nothing would make me help you, or anyone else, to do that man any harm. Nothing.'

'That's a very emotional reaction, Jenny,' he said gently.

'Perhaps it is. But you may as well know exactly where I stand.' Her clear eyes clouded for a moment as she thought

things through. 'I don't know what support you've got – Brian yes, David I'm not sure. But *I'll* be against you, and so will Bill Riley. With Edward's casting vote –' she felt a moment of anticipatory triumph '– you'll lose, Martin. You'll lose!'

CHAPTER TEN

NEXT day the board met. The day had been set routinely to examine the success or otherwise of the share issue, and it was on that premise that Edward opened the meeting.

'Before we go any further, Mr Chairman . . .' Farrell intervened.

'Yes, Martin?'

'I'd like to move that this meeting be adjourned for twenty-four hours.'

'On what grounds?'

Farrell took a deep breath. 'It is my intention to present an emergency motion, Mr Chairman. That motion will call for your resignation as Chairman and Managing Director. I think it would be only right and proper for the board to have time to study the motion and consider its merits.'

The great wall of icy cold water washed over them all. So it had really happened! Though they had discussed it, none of them had really believed the motion would actually be put, except Brian whose business brain had been able to see the debit and credit outline as clearly as Farrell's.

Edward was determined not to show how much he was shaken. He said, 'I have a motion that we adjourn. Is there a seconder?'

'I second,' Brian said – thereby declaring his position.

'This demand for my resignation,' Edward said, with a glance at Farrell, 'does anyone second that?'

'Yes, Mr Chairman, I second,' Brian said again.

'In the circumtances, I think we should adjourn.' Edward surveyed the others. 'Is anyone against?' No one spoke. 'Right. We meet again at three p.m. tomorrow.'

The gathering broke up at once. There was no pretence that they could go back to their offices and get on with some work. Martin Farrell went out with Brian, and stopped a little beyond the boardroom door so as to collect Riley and David. As

they went out to the car park Farrell was suggesting that they should go and have a meal together, so as to talk.

'I don't exactly see the point of that,' Riley said.

'Just so that we know where we stand.'

'We know where we stand already, don't we?' Riley asked grumpily.

Farrell was about to ensure that Brian would come, when David spoke first, touching his brother on the arm. 'Look, Brian.' He nodded to the other side of the car park.

Ann was there, waving to Brian. And either side of her were Brian's son and daughter.

Brian scarcely noticed his brother quietly fade away from his side. He was staring in astonished dismay at his wife and children. What was Ann doing here, in the first place? And why were the children with her? Why weren't they at school?

He made his way across the car park, seized by a feeling of concern. The children, pleased to see him, were bouncing up and down in excitement. He smiled at them, and it was impossible not to include Ann in that smile too.

'Hello,' he said to her. 'What are you doing here?'

Carole wrapped herself round one of his arms and smiled up at him. Ann said: 'We'd all decided to go to the park for an hour, and then my car wouldn't start. I wondered if you'd mind terribly if. . . .'

'No, of course not,' he replied, feeling in his pocket for his car key

'Thank you. We'll drop you off on the way, shall we?'

Brian was about to say no thanks. His little boy intervened. 'Mum bought me a new cricket bat today!' he said, brandishing it.

'That's what all this is about,' Ann explained. 'He can't wait to try it.'

'I'm not playing with a hard ball,' Carole said, tugging at her father's arm to move him towards the car. 'Come on, Daddy.'

'You don't have to,' Nigel said to his sister. 'We'll use a tennis ball.'

'Don't bother about me,' Brian said to Ann. 'I'll get a lift.'

'Oh, it's no bother – and you seem to be on your way home

now.' Her glance took in the car park. No one else was about now.

'Come *on*, Daddy,' Carole said.

It was simpler to accept the lift. He didn't want to, but how could he say, in front of his own children, 'I don't want to be in the same car with you'?

'If you came to the park too,' Nigel said as they drove out through the gates, 'we could try out my bat properly, with a cricket ball.'

'I expect Daddy's busy, darling,' Ann reproved him.

'There are a few things I ought to do,' Brian said. Talk to Farrell about tactics for tomorrow, for instance. To Nigel he said, 'I hope you've put some linseed oil on it?'

'I told him to,' Ann said.

'I was going to anyway,' Nigel said, pouting a little.

'Sorry. I was only trying to think what Daddy would have said.'

'I don't mind playing with a proper cricket ball,' Carole put in, 'but only if you promise not to hit it hard.'

Brian felt a beast, letting down his own son by not helping him try out his first cricket bat and a hard ball.

Which was exactly what Ann was trying to achieve. A few days of living on her own, all hope gone of ever seeing Nick again, had shown her that she'd better cut her losses. Brian might have begun divorce proceedings; his quietly persistent detective might have got a signed statement from her; nevertheless, all was not lost. Not while there were still cards to play, chessmen to move. Ann had chosen to change her ground and use the children as pawns; she knew that where the children were concerned Brian was vulnerable. Reticent and inarticulate, he was never able to convey to them how much he cared, but he loved them in a perplexed, anxious way. She knew that since the marriage had broken down he'd been several times to see them, taking their grandmother with him, perhaps with some idea of giving them a sense of stability and security.

She said very little on the drive away from the depot; she let the children do it all for her. And they, innocent traitors, hammered at him: 'Do come, Daddy, Carole can't really

bowl.' 'Well, I'm not interested in soppy old cricket really. But I'll play if Daddy does.' 'Will you teach me to spin the ball, Daddy?'

Brian never knew if he actually agreed to come. They ended up in the park, with a thick twig and Brian's jacket for a wicket, and Nigel wielding the new bat.

Nigel had a lot more enthusiasm than talent, but that didn't matter. He was enjoying himself hugely, slapping the ball away to mid-off where Carole consistently missed it.

'Your left foot's too far away from the bat,' Brian called as Nigel stepped out to meet his next ball.

Nigel, unheeding, hit it in a thrash of movement that sent it skipping over the uneven park turf. Carole went galloping after it.

'Is he going to bat all the time?' she complained as she trotted back.

'Let's have a proper game,' her brother suggested. 'Me and Mum against you and Carole.'

'Well, perhaps your mother would rather not play. . . .'

'I'll risk it if you will,' Ann said.

'Super!' cried Nigel. 'Toss for first innings!'

So the game was begun. Nigel called correctly and elected (surprise, surprise) to bat. He improved as the innings progressed, though his style would never have been approved by Neville Cardus. It was Ann who caught him out, running for and catching a high ball.

'Well caught, Mummy!' Carole crowed.

'I thought you were supposed to be on *my* side!' protested the batsman.

'Oh, dear, didn't I do the right thing?' Ann said, tossing the ball to Brian.

'Of course you did, Mummy. Come on – you're in now.' Nigel surrendered his precious bat to her, and she took his place at the wicket.

Brian stood looking at the slim figure in jeans and open-necked blouse, stooping to take up a batsman's stance with the junior-size bat. 'I think Carole should bowl now,' he said.

'But you haven't finished your over,' Nigel said.

'Yes, come on, Daddy, see if you can get Mummy out.'

Since there seemed no alternative, Brian bowled to Ann – gently, so as not to bruise an elbow or a knee should she fail to connect. But she sloshed out at it as women do, hit it, and the ball went off towards the boundary.

'Oh, well hit, Mum!' Nigel shouted. 'Come on, run. Run!'

She went scampering down the pitch, making four runs before Carole could retrieve. Her thick smooth hair swung, she looked young and carefree. Brian watched her in silence while his son cheered.

The game ended when Carole had had her turn with the bat, which wasn't as much fun as she'd privately expected – she decided she much preferred tennis and argued with Nigel on that score all the way home. Brian drove them. As they were making their way to the car Ann said: 'There's a casserole in the oven. I expect the children would like it if you could eat with us.'

He tried desperately to think of a convincing reason why he couldn't, but his brain refused to function. 'I'm not really very hungry,' he muttered.

She laid a hand on his sleeve. 'Brian, I've explained to them, as I'm sure you have, that they still have a father and a mother who love them both, even if we live apart. I don't want them to be deprived of your company because of anything that's wrong between us.' She gave him one of her smiles – frank, open, friendly. 'I'm only suggesting a family meal, Brian.'

Put like that, it would have been not only churlish to refuse – it would have been downright dereliction of duty. He said that he would stay for a meal, which brought cheers from the children when they were told. Their pleasure made the situation all the more poignant: all they really wanted was for things to go back to the way they used to be, and every sign of that was a happy omen to them.

When they came into the house there was a welcoming, appetising smell from something in the oven. Nigel and Carole rushed upstairs to wash for dinner. Ann checked one or two things in the kitchen while Brian poured them each a glass of the amontillado he had opened – how long ago it seemed! – for Martin Farrell. Ann thanked him but left her drink to run upstairs – to check on the children, she said. But when she

came down she'd changed into a long hostess gown, not grand enough to be called an evening gown but certainly with a lot of appeal in its soft, flowing line.

The meal was a success. She had made a simple sweet for the children with chocolate buttons as decoration, which delighted them. For Brian there was a bottle of the '67 Burgundy which he thought they'd run out of – strange that Ann should have been able to unearth one more bottle. When the children went to bed they came to kiss him in turn, Carole kissing him fiercely, Nigel giving him a strangling hug.

He sat quietly with a brandy while Ann supervised the tucking in and lights out. The house was tranquil around him – not silent, but with that happy murmur of liveability that he missed so much in the loneliness of David's flat.

When his wife came back she was moving softly, as women do when children are settling down. She poured herself a drink, then held the decanter towards his glass.

'Not for me, Ann. It's time I was going.'

'Keep me company,' she coaxed.

'Better not. I'm driving.'

'Just a small one,' she said, pouring.

'Well, all right. Thank You.'

She sat down opposite him, one leg tucked up in the armchair so that the folds of the soft crepe outlined her hips and thighs. She sipped. 'I'm glad you decided to stay for a meal. The children did appreciate it.'

'It was very pleasant.'

'At least it made a bit of a break for you. This business of the share issue sounds dreadfully worrying.'

'It's a headache, no doubt about it.'

'And you say it's finally come to a confrontation with Edward?'

'Well, not a confrontation, exactly,' he demurred. 'Martin and I are trying to avoid that.'

'But why should you?' she said sympathetically. 'You've put up with so much—'

'No, no,' he said. 'As a man, I respect Ted enormously.'

'But you've thought he was wrong in that job for some time.'

'I've had my reservations. Now it's come to the point where

it really is better if he goes. But whether he will....' He shrugged and sipped his brandy, lulled a little by its rich warmth, by the relief of being able to talk to someone about Hammonds.

'He must go, surely. If he's out-voted.'

'I doubt if he will be. I quite expect to lose.'

Ann was surprised. 'If you think Martin Farrell's going to lose, why support him?'

'Good old-fashioned principle.' Brian laughed shortly. 'Sounds funny coming from me, doesn't it? Me, I'm the original pragmatist. When it's suited me I've equated principle with dogma. I'm not in the habit of making empty gestures out of so-called principle.'

'Well, I'm not quite so sure of that, Brian,' she replied with some dryness. To her way of thinking, the divorce was the result of Brian's principles; she certainly hadn't asked for one.

Brian scarcely heard the remark. He was deep in his own thoughts. 'I don't want to hurt Ted. But I have to say what I think, vote for what I believe in, no matter what.'

'That's very admirable, Brian. I respect you for the stand you're taking.' What nonsense, she was thinking. He's only making himself miserable about nothing. 'I respect a great deal about you, Brian,' she went on. 'It's funny that I've never said so before.'

'There's never been a fight like this before on the board,' he said, failing to take up the personal angle of her remark. 'I've never really had to stand up and be counted, until now. Perhaps in the past the main problem was just to keep the machinery ticking over, but once the business began to function well, the members of the board began to look around and wonder where we were headed....' He went on for a while, retracing the steps by which Hammonds had moved upward in the road haulage league.

Ann listened, commenting now and then. Then she asked intelligent questions about the stock market, having read all the heavy Sunday papers in order to know what to ask. Brian explained how the current market situation had bogged down the Hammond launch. In a way, although he knew it was Ann he was speaking to, it was to Edward that he put his arguments,

trying to will his brother into an understanding of the company's plight so that next day there need be no boardroom battle.

It was only in the last few weeks that Brian had understood how much the Hammond family meant to him. He had often felt, until recently, that he had nothing in common with his brothers except Hammond Transport Services Ltd, and that only ties of conventional affection bound him to his mother. That had been because he had chosen to make a career in a cool and analytical discipline, that of accountancy; he had worked hard all his life, turning a natural aptitude for mathematics and a quick brain to the task of understanding the forces that move the business world.

Ted and his enthusiasms and quick tempers, Dave with his swallow-like dartings into trouble and out again – they had seemed to him as if they came from some other clan. Either that or he himself was a changeling. But as his own carefully-built world collapsed about him Brian had discovered there was something that still supported him – the foundation of family affection.

David and his wife had given him their flat, leaving some of their furniture for him and making sure he had sheets and towels and the mundane necessities. Edward, despite outbursts of understandable irritation over business problems, had shouldered burdens that should have been Brian's, had demonstrated by a sort of solid durability that he was *there*, like Everest. Both of them had refused to allow him to become a hermit; they had dragged him out to Jill and David's penthouse-warming, they spent time with him over a drink in the evenings, they had had a concern for him.

His mother, too, had surprised him by the warmth and strength of her affection. She rang him, worried about him, had him to dinner to make sure he ate properly. He knew she grieved over his broken marriage. He was sorry he had spoken coldly to her when she made a faltering attempt to dissuade him from divorce.

He had found that they somehow supported him with their day-to-day involvement. And he in his turn needed them.

That was why it now seemed so ironic that he would take

part tomorrow in what might be the death struggles of Hammond Transport. He wished with all his heart that it needn't be so. That was why he talked it through now, saying in his heart to Edward: 'Step down. Don't battle it out. We're all going to be hurt – and there's enough pain in the world already.'

Ann listened almost unspeaking. Unobtrusively she made sure that his brandy glass, while never full, never became completely empty. The time slipped by. Brian might never have looked at the clock if Carole hadn't cried out in her sleep, a thing she'd done since a baby. Reluctantly, in her new role of loving mother, Ann went up to make sure she hadn't kicked the covers off. When she came back Brian had got to his feet.

'I must go. Look at the time!'

'One for the road?'

'No, no – if the police stop me I'll lose my licence.' He wasn't drunk but, as the Irish say, he had the drink taken.

'Would you like some coffee?' she suggested. Anything to delay him.

'I think that's quite a good idea.'

She went beyond the breakfast bar to put coffee in the percolator. Everyone knows that coffee with ground coffee beans takes longer than hot water and coffee granules. Brian was comparing his watch with the mantlepiece clock. 'It'll be a long hard day tomorrow,' he muttered. 'I mean *today*. Today. By the time I get back to the flat and into bed. . . .'

'You may as well stay here,' Ann said.

And that was the object of the exercise.

Ann was no legal genius, but she could look up a reference book as well as the next person. Brian had a legal dictionary, in which she'd read the section on divorce. One sentence had leapt out at her: 'If the injured spouse is aware of the adultery yet thereafter freely consents to continue in cohabitation, he or she is regarded as having condoned the offence and may not afterwards put the adultery forward as a ground for divorce.'

So far as she could gather it didn't seem to matter whether or not she had signed a statement admitting adultery – if Brian stayed here with her tonight that was 'cohabitation' and even

if they didn't go to bed together, their marriage was regarded as being resumed and stable.

'There's no point in turning out now,' she said calmly. 'I'll make up a bed for you and if you have a lie-in tomorrow, you'll feel fine.'

'I ought to go.' Brian wasn't quite sure why this was important. His mental processes had slowed down almost to a standstill, what with the brandy and fatigue. Yet he knew he shouldn't stay.

'You'll be in bed an hour earlier if you stay,' she pointed out. 'And it would be a nice surprise for the children in the morning. They did enjoy themselves this evening.'

'They did, didn't they?' He recalled his daughter's little pale face, all alight with laughter as he helped her make a pattern round her pudding-plate with the chocolate buttons used as a decoration. Like most men, Brian had an especially soft spot for his little girl. Of the two children she was more like him in character – withdrawn, quiet, easily thrown by emotional problems. But in looks she was like Ann, and it was this that made her somehow doubly precious.

'I think they love you more than they love me,' Ann said in a sad voice.

'That's not true,' he said, feeling guilty. 'That's silly.'

'Well, they're closer to you, anyone can see that. They talk to you more easily. I'm at more of a distance from them. That's my fault, I know,' she said, sighing. 'It's the way I am and I can't help it. But it hurts sometimes.'

She brought the coffee tray in. He took it from her to set on the low table. Her perfume – rich, exotic – reached him as their hands almost met on the tray.

'They'll be much closer to you now,' he said. 'Bound to be. In the end I shall lose them.' Regret surged through him. They were nice kids.

'I wouldn't want that to happen.'

'Must do,' he said 'Mother there, father not. Can't be avoided.' He was having a slight problem forming sentences. Am I drunk? he wondered.

'That depends on us,' Ann said. 'We can avoid it completely.'

He grasped what she meant. 'Wrong tense, Ann,' he said,

summoning his senses. 'We *could have* avoided it. Too late now.'

She eyed him with speculation. Perhaps the coffee hadn't been a good idea. His head seemed to be clearing. Well, it had always been possible to perplex Brian by shifting her ground, which she now did.

'I've made a decision, Brian. I'm going to have the children at home.'

'They are now,' he said, immediately at a loss.

'For good. I'm taking them away from boarding-school. They'll live here at home, and go to day-schools.'

'Why?' As she'd expected, he was baffled.

'For one thing, the expense. It'll save you a lot of money.'

'I've always found the money,' he said with a kind of muffled indignation. 'I've never complained. You should have asked me first about this.'

'It hasn't been altogether easy to discuss family matters with you, Brian,' she said.

He ignored that. The idea of changing the lives of the children so fundamentally had brought his thinking processes back into action. 'I'm not sure it's the right thing.'

'Well, I am.'

'But . . . this house . . . we were going to sell it.' The inventory of household goods, the discussion of the building society mortgage – didn't she remember any of that?

'In that case I'll find a flat,' she said. Noble, self-sacrificing. 'Somewhere, anywhere. It doesn't matter.'

'But the whole point of boarding-school,' Brian protested, still not reacting to the personal issue, 'was to provide them with their own environment, in which they'd feel secure.'

'A boarding-school shouldn't be a receptacle for the children of broken marriages, Brian.'

That hit home, she saw with satisfaction.

'What's the alternative?' he demanded. 'Pretend it isn't broken?'

Now it was her turn to step back from the personal issue. Her role at the moment was little-mother-of-all-the-world. 'They're my children,' she said. 'I think they belong at home. I'll do my best, which may not be very good, but I'll do it. And

if you want to see them, it'll be that much easier for you if they're together, with me.'

'Of course I shall want to see them,' he said, alarmed by that 'if'.

'They still need you,' Ann admitted, 'and they'll go on needing you. And if you ever feel you'd rather be with them all the time, if you decided to come back for good, you'll know where we are. I know they'd like that, and I would too, but it'll be up to you.'

Brian was beginning to feel that a sleight-of-hand trick had been pulled on him. All of a sudden Ann was the injured party, sitting at home with her fatherless children, waiting for her erring husband to come back.

'I don't know how you do it, I really don't!' he declared, anger clearing his head once and for all. 'You make it sound as if I walked out for no reason at all! It wasn't my doing. I didn't want it. I expected to be married to you for the rest of my life.' He got up suddenly, staring down at her. 'There was someone called Nicholas Fox, remember? Whom you were in love with.'

Still am in love with, said a sharp clear voice within her. She was never going to be cured of that infatuation. If he were to want her back, she would go, even if she knew it meant enduring all the wounds again.

But for the moment – perhaps for ever – he was gone. She had to build with what was available. Brian was the only building block she had.

'Nicholas was a part of my life and now it's finished,' she said, 'just as Pamela Graham was once a part of yours.'

Brian could hardly believe his ears. Pamela Graham! Carole's schoolteacher, who had befriended him when Ann walked out on him two years ago – they had never got past the hand-holding stage, and well Ann knew it.

'If I may remind you,' he said, 'you had left me for over two months at that time.'

The coolness of his manner warned her not to try that trick any more. She cried: 'Does it matter who did what to whom? I'm trying to talk to you about our marriage and our children!'

'Ann,' he protested, 'what's the point? The divorce proceedings are under way.'

'All right, I can't stop you,' she said. 'I know that. But be honest about it, Brian. I'm still in this house with our children. *You* are not. I'm showing all the willingness to make things come together again. I can't stop the divorce proceedings – you can.'

Brian was silent. He would much rather have believed that the divorce was forced upon him.

'If you go on with the divorce,' she continued, watching his troubled face, 'at least be honest. Face up to the fact that it's because you don't want me any more, not because of anything I've done.' He made a move as if to protest that it was indeed what she had done that had caused the divorce, but she swept on. 'I think you'd much rather Nicholas and I wanted to be married. Then you'd feel the decision had been made for you. But it isn't like that. Nicholas is gone and I'm at your mercy. It's your decision now, not mine, and you have to make it.'

He was deeply moved by her plea. He knew it was a cry for generosity on his part and he had never been a mean man. Before him there appeared a rosy vision – the children playing in the sitting-room, Ann pottering in the kitchen, himself coming in at the front door at the end of the day's work. Could it be like that? Would Ann work at it this time? Perhaps even Ann could learn her lesson and settle down to an ordinary married life.

'We haven't made a very good job of it up to now,' she said, as if in reply to the unspoken question. 'I'm ready to try again if you are. I think I know more about myself than before – I realise I lack qualities that an ideal home-maker should have but at least I've learned to value what is here.' She made a little gesture round the room. 'I don't know, we might fail. . . . Neither of us can expect a cast-iron guarantee. But I think we know each other better now. I think we stand a chance.'

It might work. After all, they were adults. They knew better than to expect a miracle. The children . . . it would be so much better for the children.

Ann could see it was almost a victory. One more move, one more card – that was all it needed, and Brian would agree.

'When we were married,' she said softly, rising from her place and coming close to him, 'do you remember how much you wanted me? It was like that for a long time, wasn't it?' She laid her hand delicately, like a falling leaf, on the lapel of his jacket. 'Then somehow we lost it, Brian, I don't know why. But it could be like that again.'

She was against him, the fingers of her hand just beginning to edge on to the thin fabric of his shirt so that he could feel the warmth on his skin. Her lips were near. Her brown eyes were shining up at him.

As if he had been present, he saw her trying to persuade Nicholas Fox not to leave her. 'It could be like that again, Nick. You want me, you know you do.' Bodies close, lips coming closer. . . .

'I'm still the same woman, Brian,' she whispered 'I'm no different.'

He stepped back. 'But I am, Ann. In those days I wanted to touch you. Now I don't.'

He went out quickly, the glimpse of her startled disbelief sustaining him for many minutes. He drove back to the flat through empty streets, went indoors quietly so as not to disturb the sleeping neighbours.

In the flat he didn't switch on the light. He sat down on the living-room couch in the darkness. The place was silent. He could hear his own heart beating with its steady, inexorable rhythm. It would go on doing so for years. Years.

The children would grow up, and he would see them occasionally. Carole would cling to him longer than Nigel. But in the end even Carole would learn to be self-sufficient. A gap would develop between them. They would meet more and more as strangers, polite to each other, hardly knowing how to show affection.

He had made that choice. For a while under the spell of Ann's words he had thought it might be otherwise but – in the end – he had wakened from the enchantment because Ann's magic was insufficient. Not white magic, anyway, he said to himself with bitter humour.

Why had she been so clumsy? Why, why had she broken the spell? A few more seconds and he would have surrendered.

Once that was done there would have been no going back – he would have lived with his decision, his mistake.

But, being Ann, she had used a bribe when what was needed was a pledge. If she had said, 'We can be friends, at least. Let's try to be friends' – then he would have agreed. He might have regretted the foolishness afterwards when he realised that Ann did not make friends, but once it was done he would have tried to make it work.

The simple fact was – she didn't understand. She didn't know, she couldn't discriminate. 'Love' – what did the word mean to her? He couldn't tell. He was almost sure she didn't 'love' the children. She accepted that they had to be looked after but that wasn't anything very deep in the way of maternal devotion.

She certainly didn't 'love' Brian. Yet she had been offering herself to him. . . .

It was no use thinking about it. The whole thing was over – a little pile of rubble that had once been a marriage. He looked back and understood now, with total finality, that he had wasted ten years of his life on a relationship that had never been the slightest use. He had fathered two children who would drift away from him. He had turned his back on his wife who, God help her, was totally incapable of fending for them or for herself.

And so what lay ahead? Tomorrow's wrangle in the boardroom.

He couldn't face it yet. He needed to sleep but he knew he would not. There was only one escape.

He went to the drinks table and in the darkness picked up the first bottle he touched, and a glass. Then, systematically, he set about drinking himself into a stupor.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On leaving the boardroom that same afternoon Jennifer had automatically joined up with Edward, who to her dismay took her home with him.

'I don't know what you hope to achieve!' she protested when she saw where they were heading.

Neither did he, but in this terrible situation he felt something at least could be done on a personal level. In a moment of crisis, surely it was permissible to bring together the two people in the world he cared deeply about.

His mother was listening to Mozart broadcast from St John's, Smith Square. Hearing his key in the lock she turned down the volume, calling: 'Edward?'

'Hello, Mother,' he replied from the hall, giving her time to prepare. 'Jennifer's with me.'

Mary Hammond braced herself. 'Good afternoon, Miss Kingsley,' she said as Jennifer came in at Edward's side.

'Good afternoon, Mrs Hammond. How are you?'

'This is rather an unexpected pleasure. The last time we met was at Jill and David's house-warming.' An agreeable occasion, she recalled, during which she got a great deal of pleasure in seeing how Martin Farrell seemed to hang around Jennifer. Mary darted a glance of reproach at her son. 'You should have let me know, Edward. I could have made preparation to entertain our guest.'

'I wasn't really prepared for what's happened myself, Mother,' he replied on a note she recognised – a hard and unsubtle note. 'You're very strong on the family – I think you should know what that family is doing to itself.'

'What?' said Mary, her gaze going to Jennifer. 'What is it doing? How is Miss Kingsley involved?'

'By being my only ally in a fight that's just starting between me on one side, and Brian and David on the other.'

Mary remembered what she herself had said: that she had taught Brian to be bitter. 'What has Brian done?'

'He's seconding a motion from Martin Farrell, calling for my removal as Chairman and Managing Director.'

Jennifer had taken a seat across the room, so that she had a clear view of Mrs Hammond. She saw how the older woman's hands tensed on her needlework. For a moment she felt pity. To be old and unwell and see family troubles looming . . . that was dreadful.

'But David will be on your side, Edward. He must be,' Mary protested.

'He wasn't last time. He ganged up with Brian.'

She sat turning her wedding-ring on her finger. Jennifer noticed how much more frail that finger was than the last time she had been in this room, upbraiding Mary Hammond for trying to buy the affections of Jennifer's daughter.

Mary said sadly: 'You should never have become a public company. I didn't like it at the time.'

Do you think I did? he thought. Aloud he said, 'It's too late for that. It's done.'

'You supported that idea, I believe, Miss Kingsley,' she went on. She was looking for a scapegoat.

'Yes, I did,' Jennifer admitted. 'I found the arguments in favour of it convincing. But if I'd known this would happen. . . .' Her voice tailed off in misery.

'Do you think I should stand down, Mother?'

'Certainly not!' Mary declared. 'You're the eldest. You're entitled to the position.'

'As it happens, they can't win.' He explained how the voting would line up.

'But if you survive this attack upon you it will be because of Miss Kingsley and Mr Riley, not your brothers?' Mary asked, biting her lip.

'Exactly. The Hammond family seems to be finally falling apart.'

Mary felt her heart thumping in that slow, painful way in which it reacted to shock. 'Miss Kingsley, I never dreamed that a situation like this could arise.' Her voice was low, her hands trembled in her lap. 'It would not only be wrong, it would be shameful if Edward were to be forced out of

his rightful position. For your part in preventing this, I must thank you.'

'No thanks are necessary, Mrs Hammond.'

'At least let me say that you have my gratitude.' It was the most difficult thing she had ever had to say in her life, but she said it.

She went to make coffee for them. Her heart and her mind were full of the things that as yet her son didn't comprehend. He would fight back against this attack on his position as Chairman, and win; but even if he won, he lost – he lost the things that really mattered in the company and in the family: the children of Robert Hammond, working together, to create something greater than Robert Hammond.

When she returned to the sitting-room she tried to put this forward. Edward said in despair: 'What else can I do, except fight back?'

'Nothing,' Jennifer said.

'The trouble is, Mother – you're right.'

'Then if you really feel that—'

'I do, Jenny.'

'When you've won, make peace at once. Treat it, not as a personal issue, but simply as a decision on how the company is to be managed. Once that's decided, make it easy for those who were against you to stay on the board.'

Mary nodded agreement.

'Including Martin Farrell?' Edward said.

'You must decide that for yourself,' Jennifer said, meeting his eye.

Riley too was coming to the understanding that he must decide for himself. He had met and talked with Farrell and David Hammond, listened more than he talked, and afterwards met his wife to take her out to a movie and a drink. All through the film his mind was elsewhere.

In the saloon bar afterwards Gwen said: 'Well, *I* enjoyed it even if you didn't.'

'What d'you mean? I thought it was great.'

'You didn't take in a word,' she retorted. 'Never mind, it's nice to be taken out now and then. I appreciate it.'

'It's nice to be able to afford it. Let's hope it lasts.'

'Why shouldn't it?'

'If I pick the wrong side tomorrow,' her husband said, his brow creasing up almost to his thinning hair-line, 'I'll be off that board so fast it'll look as if I've gone down the Cresta run.'

'You'll take Mr Edward's side,' Gwen said, astonished there should be any question. 'You'll have to.'

'No, Gwen, I don't have to.'

'After all he's done for you!'

'I know what he's done for me, love.'

'To turn against him now.... That's not you, Bill! You couldn't do that!'

'I don't want to turn against him. I want to back him. But if I do, it's got to be because I've weighed up the arguments in my own mind and made my own decisions.'

Mary Hammond would have been quite astounded to hear those words. She had thought over the situation after going to bed and decided that, though the blind loyalty of Jennifer Kingsley and Bill Riley could be relied upon, it was wrong for the Hammond brothers to be split. She rang Brian but there was no reply. She rang David, who was in bed, and told him sternly that she would never forgive him if he voted against Edward next day.

Jill, hearing David's end of the conversation, said: 'I agree with your mother.'

David sighed. 'The feminine reaction always seems to be personalised!'

'We're loyal to people. What's wrong with that?'

'Which people, though?' he countered. 'Shareholders are people too.'

'They're anonymous. I can't feel about them in the same way.'

'You're a shareholder. You're not anonymous.'

'David, I don't *care* what happens to those shares!'

'What happens to those shares will reflect whether Hammond Transport Services Ltd flourishes, becomes a permanent

invalid, or dies. Which affects every man and woman we employ. They're people too.'

'I think Edward cares about those people,' Jill said softly, 'more than any financier ever will.'

David laid his face against her so that the silk of her hair was smooth and fragrant against his skin. 'It's funny how things turn out,' he murmured. 'I've always resented all that money your father left you. Perhaps that was childish and silly, but I did. I suppose I wanted the responsibility of caring for you, but your money—'

'Stood in the way?'

'Yes. It's different now. It's up to me to provide for you and the baby out of what I earn. I can't opt out any more. There's no cushion to fall back on, now that you've put almost everything into this penthouse and the remainder into Hammonds' shares.' He made a sound that was half a laugh, half a sigh. 'I've got what I wanted.'

'Lucky you,' Jill said, half asleep. 'Put the light out, darling, will you?'

He obeyed. She cuddled up to him and closed her eyes.

'Someone once said,' David murmured, ' "Take what you want, and pay for it." I know what it means, now.'

'Goodnight, darling,' his wife murmured.

'Goodnight, my love.' But he didn't go to sleep.

His mother, too, was still awake. She was trying for the third time to get a reply from Brian's flat. She frowned a little, divided between anxiety that he should still be out so late, and dismay that she couldn't reach him to explain the wrongness of his intentions. She was sure that if she could just speak to him, he would see.... But the phone rang unanswered. It didn't occur to her to try his house, where at that moment he was explaining to Ann the rightness of his intentions

In the morning Jennifer arrived at the depot early. She too had had a bad night and had got out of bed almost with relief, glad to be able to distract her thoughts with the activity of making early morning tea. She drank it standing by the window, watching the dawn break over the chimneypots, resolving that

she and Edward between them would hold Hammonds together. Mary had been right last night: the essential thing was to preserve Robert Hammond's dream of a fruitful partnership.

When she went into the boardroom to put out pens and scratch-pads, she was flustered to find Martin Farrell already there, drinking coffee. She should have expected it, really. Hadn't he told her that, living alone like herself, he was an early riser?

'Good morning,' she faltered. 'I didn't mean to disturb—'

'It's all right.' He was much more calm than she. 'Coffee?'

She shrugged. Why not? He poured and handed it to her, looking at her with his grave regard.

'Friendship . . . or whatever we feel . . . shouldn't be affected by a business disagreement, Jenny.'

'It's rather more than that as far as I'm concerned.'

He set down his cup and moved – for him – rather restlessly. 'Do you think I want to sit there this afternoon and try and get Ted voted out?'

'If you don't want to,' she said with unassailable feminine logic, 'you don't have to.'

'Oh yes I do.'

'Why?'

'Because I care about this company.' There was something like sharpness in the riposte. He let it evaporate in the air before adding, 'Let's not rehearse the meeting now.'

'No. Going through it once will be bad enough.'

Brian came in, looking haggard. Normally Jennifer would have expressed concern, but she couldn't bear to be in the room with Edward's two opponents.

'Excuse me,' she said, 'I'll finish my coffee in my office.'

As she went out Brian poured himself a cup with a somewhat unsteady hand. Watching him, Farrell said: 'If I didn't know you better, Brian, I'd say you were hung over.'

'Not exactly,' Brian replied. 'But I had more brandy than I should, and then I couldn't sleep.'

'Anxiety?'

'Regret,' Brian said.

'Yes.' Martin looked at the hopeful graphs, now wall-

mounted, that he had prepared in evidence for going public. Regret. Perhaps it would have been better to let well alone. But since it was done. . . .

'Will you be all right?' he asked, meaning 'for the fray.'

'I shall be all right later on,' Brian said, rubbing his eyes with two fingers. 'Have we made any converts?'

'Not yet. Both David and Bill Riley reserved judgment last night.'

'Are you hopeful about them?'

'Not very.'

'So we'll be in a minority of two. Oh well. . . .' He drank his coffee at a gulp and went to fetch another cupful.

'I'm not admitting defeat before we start, Brian. I'm going all out to win.'

Brian nodded, but without conviction. 'I suppose I shall have to resign from the board.' Finding something else to do was no problem: there's always work for a chartered accountant. Trouble was, it didn't attract him any more. His heart was here, at Hammonds.

There was the whole morning to go, and lunchtime too, before the meeting. Edward took Jennifer and Bill Riley to lunch; he thought of it as being a sub-committee to plan strategy, but Bill Riley saw it more as a sort of lobbying technique.

'Will you be able to stay in the chair?' Riley asked after Edward had described how he intended to run the meeting.

Edward was struck momentarily dumb. 'That's . . . that's a good point, Bill. I'd overlooked that. Thanks. I'll give it some thought. Of course I want to speak in my own defence – I'm entitled to do that.'

'You can do that whether you're in the chair or not.'

'I hope you'll have something to say too, Bill.'

'*I* certainly shall,' Jennifer said with pugnacity. 'Quite a lot!'

'Yes, but don't get carried away, Jenny. I want to avoid a lasting breach if I can.' For Bill's benefit he added, 'You see, I don't want anyone to feel obliged to resign if they lose.'

'You'll be a good man if you can pull that off,' Riley said with a terse laugh.

'Well, I'm going to have a go.'

'By being magnanimous in victory,' Jenny explained. It was a lovely phrase: they all smiled at each other in approval.

There were no smiles, however, as the board meeting began. To Edward, David looked unusually serious, and Brian looked as if he had gone out last night and got drunk. Jennifer was lighting a cigarette with hands that trembled. Riley was massaging the back of his neck with the tips of his fingers, a wrinkle he'd learned to ease tension while he was a lorry-driver.

From Martin Farrell's face there was nothing to be learned. He looked in complete control of himself. The net-and-trident man, out on the sand in the centre of the arena, waiting for the swordsman to walk out from the gladiators' quarters.

'This meeting,' Edward began, 'is a resumption of the meeting adjourned by reason of Mr Farrell's intention to move an emergency motion.'

Jennifer put up a hand. 'Has Mr Farrell considered withdrawing his motion?'

'The motion stands, Mr Chairman.' Farrell recalled that David had put the same question privately last night: 'Why don't you withdraw it? It looks as if you may lose and if you do you'll have to resign. So why put your head on the block for nothing?' The reason was simple: Farrell believed that he was right and that his way was the only way to save Hammonds.

Brian now spoke. 'A point of order, Mr Chairman.'

'Yes, Brian.'

'The question of who should chair this meeting.'

'Yes, this point was brought to my attention by Mr Riley,' Edward replied. One in the eye for *you*, he thought, as he saw Brian glower at the information. 'I was going to raise it myself, Brian. Since this motion calls for my dismissal—'

'Resignation,' Farrell corrected.

'Resignation, it might be difficult for me to chair the discussion in the face of any objections on that score.'

Jennifer and Riley had no objection. Neither, he saw with rising hope, had David. But Farrell spoke up.

'I have every faith in your impartiality as Chairman and your neutrality as guide of our discussion.'

'Good,' said Jennifer. 'Then let's move on.'

'I hadn't finished, Mr Chairman,' Farrell went on gently. 'There is the question of the casting vote possessed by the chair. In the event that the rest of the board voted three to two in favour of the motion, you could use your personal vote and your casting vote to defeat the proposal.'

'Exactly the same applies whoever is in the chair,' Riley pointed out.

Farrell paused a moment to let everyone take the point that not everyone was as likely to vote against the motion as Edward. He then said: 'Mr Hammond is more directly involved than some other members of the board.'

Edward gave a grin. 'You mean the axe is over my head and no one else's?' He glanced round at his co-directors before saying to Farrell: 'All right, since you have this touching faith in my impartiality, suppose I remain in the chair but forego my casting vote.'

'The company's articles of association forbid that, Mr Chairman,' Brian put in.

'I'm sure the articles of association don't force the chairman to use it,' Edward retorted with some irritation.

'I think they do, in the event of a hung jury,' Brian said.

'Are we going to sit here all afternoon and argue about who's going to chair the meeting?' Jennifer cried, unable to endure this continuing suspense.

'Mickey Mouse can sit here for all I care,' Edward said, getting annoyed.

Farrell's mouth tilted up at the ends. 'Mickey Mouse isn't a member of this board so, lacking his services, I suggest we try to agree on an alternative.'

'It can't be either the proposer or the seconder,' Riley reminded them.

Brian gave him a frown. 'Neither, with all respect to their abilities, could I agree to either Miss Kingsley or Mr Riley.'

'Well, that thins the field a bit,' snorted Edward.

He looked at David. So did the rest. David went red. 'I'd rather not be considered, Mr Chairman.'

Poor kid, thought Edward, much to his own surprise.

'David, I don't know your opinion about the motion. Are you for it or against it?'

'Isn't that an improper question, Mr Chairman?' Brian asked quickly.

Edward stared at him with indignation. 'D'you want a neutral chairman or not? How can I find out except by asking? Dave?'

'At this stage, I'm not committed either way, Mr Chairman.'

'Are we agreed,' asked Edward, 'that Mr David Hammond should take the chair during the discussion of this item?'

No one dissented except David. 'Mr Chairman, I'd prefer to decline, if that's in order.'

'It's in order, Dave, but there's no alternative. Come on. It's all yours.'

Reluctantly and cursing the day he was born, David got up and exchanged places with his eldest brother. He settled himself in the chairman's seat and surveyed the others nervously. Funny how different they all looked from here.

'I don't welcome this,' he began, the flush slowly beginning to go from his thin face. 'However, I seem to have no choice. I'll read the motion which is before this meeting.' He picked it up, cleared his throat, and read: 'That it is the opinion of this board of directors that Mr Edward Hammond should resign from his present offices as Chairman and Managing Director, and take up the position of Technical Director, thus retaining his excellent abilities in the service of the company, for which he has done so much.' He stopped. Christ, he thought, which way to the firing squad? 'The motion is proposed by Mr Martin Farrell and seconded by Mr Brian Hammond. Perhaps you would now speak to the motion, Mr Farrell.'

'Thank you, Mr Chairman. I have, as you know, talked privately to Mr Edward Hammond and asked him to stand down voluntarily. I am very sorry indeed that he wasn't able to accept my advice. . . .' He slowed a little to assess the emotions on the faces of his listeners. 'I would have been spared the necessity of inflicting this traumatic experience on the board. Whatever the outcome it cannot be good for the company. I

can only say that it is my belief that it will be the worse for the company if this motion is not passed.'

There was a weight to his words that no one had expected. Edward was impressed despite himself. He was listening intently.

'I tried,' Farrell went on, 'to incorporate in my motion the profound respect and admiration which I personally feel for Mr Edward Hammond. That may sound like hypocrisy, but it is not. He has tremendous ability, and Hammond Transport Services Ltd needs him, and always will. But for good or ill, when you become a public company, you change everything. I shall contend that, if this company is to survive in a form which any of you would recognise, Mr Edward Hammond is now a liability as Chairman and Managing Director, a liability which this company cannot afford.'

He glanced at his notes. 'First, the failure of Hammond Transport's shares issue was mostly due to unfortunate market factors, but Mr Hammond's remark – "damn the shareholders" – had some bearing.'

Edward winced. Was that going to haunt him for ever?

'Two investment managers mentioned it to me,' Farrell went on inexorably, 'as their reason for holding back when they might have otherwise invested. Secondly, there is the necessity for the confidence of the City in the Chairman and Managing Director of a public company. It is quite clear that men of influence in financial circles are turning their back on our present Chairman and Managing Director, and consequently on Hammond Transport Services Ltd. As a public company this is most serious for us. There must be two-way traffic so that the City can know of and comment on our plans, thereby feeling interested in our shares.

'Finally, our merchant bankers, the underwriters—'

'Your employers,' Edward interjected, unable to remain totally silent under this masterly swishing of the net over his head.

'I didn't think it was necessary to declare my interest, Mr Chairman,' Farrell said with a glance at David.

'We all know you're an executive with our merchant bankers,' David said, as if to say 'Don't be childish, Ted.'

'The underwriters have been left with three-quarters of the shares on their hands. To sell those shares we need to restore confidence in Hammond Transport Services Ltd. That confidence will only come about, regrettably, if we show the City a new Chairman, and a new Managing Director. Otherwise, sanctions might be applied, which would end this company's independence.'

Now what the hell does he mean by *that*? David asked himself. But Farrell was going on, before he could inquire.

'Those are what might be termed the "external" reasons. There is also an "internal" reason why Mr Hammond should resign, and I refer to his conduct as Managing Director, in which post he has serious weaknesses.'

Jennifer could bear no more. 'Oh, for God's sake, what do you know about it?'

'Jenny, please,' David said to check her. Her colour was high.

'I'm sorry, Mr Chairman, but when Mr Farrell starts criticising the way a job is done when he knows practically nothing about transport—'

'I don't have to be able to do the job myself, Mr Chairman, to judge efficiency. And in some respects Mr Hammond is inefficient.'

'Edward can do the work of every man in the depot!' Jennifer exclaimed.

'And often tries to, Mr Chairman. The role of a Managing Director is to delegate, not to do other men's work. In a company aiming at expansion, the ability to delegate is crucial. I therefore urge the board to support my motion.'

'Thank you,' said David. 'Brian?'

Brian cleared his throat. 'I would like to associate myself with the tribute to all Edward's good work in the past. Like Martin, I'd have preferred a quiet solution. May I just formally second the motion at this stage, and perhaps intervene later?'

'Certainly.' David looked at the board. No one seemed to want to say anything. 'Ted? Perhaps you'd like to speak.'

Edward had been rattled by the force of the indictment against him. Moreover, without the authority of the chair, he

felt diminished. But like a good Roman gladiator, he hefted his short-sword and went into battle.

'Well, Mr Chairman. . . . What do all my crimes add up to? I made a daft remark about shareholders. At the time, after a press conference, I was told it was all right. The shares don't sell and suddenly it's not all right after all. Not all right with who? Who are these City types that Farrell says are not happy about me? Is he saying what Paul Merroney told him to say? Do we want a situation where some whizz kid of a merchant banker says "Change this Chairman, get rid of that Managing Director" and someone says "Yes sir" and trots along here to fix it?'

Martin Farrell raised his head from the mandala he'd been doodling on his scratch-pad. 'I'm sorry, Mr Chairman, that sounds like an attack on my personal integrity.'

'I've been under attack all afternoon,' Edward declared. 'Is it one-way traffic only?'

'Ted, I think we should avoid personalities,' David said.

'Could I clarify, Mr Chairman?' Farrell asked. 'My proposal is designed to salvage the company and it is *my* proposal entirely. I'm acting as I see fit, and in the best interest of the company – which is in desperate trouble and if anyone doesn't know that they haven't been listening.' There was a coldness and hardness in his delivery now that had not been there before.

'Ted?' David said, turning back to him.

'Yes, Mr Chairman. Mr Farrell mentioned –' he consulted his notes " '– Sanctions which would end this company's independence. . . .' " What does that mean? Has he got information that we haven't?'

'That's a fair question, Mr Chairman. May I deal with it later, with any other points which may arise?'

'Certainly.'

'What else?' Edward pursued. 'Oh, yes, I manage at too low a level. That means I get off my behind and dirty my hands occasionally. It's my way of keeping in touch. Frank in the warehouse, Alan the Depot Superintendent, Bill here . . . they expect it. They know I'm going to drop in on them, keeping an eye on things.'

'How many places can you be in at once?' Brian inquired. 'The London depot, the depot at Dover, the possible future depot in Milan, the chain of service depots that Mr Riley wants?'

'I can always be where I'm needed,' Edward replied 'And my work load is always dealt with, Brian. I'm here most nights until eight, nine or ten o'clock—'

'Catching up on work that should have been done during the day,' Brian cut in.

Edward looked at David. 'Mr Chairman, am I to be allowed to speak or not? Mr Farrell was given a good innings.'

David nodded and tapped the table with his pen. 'Let's not have any more interruptions, please.'

'It's like this,' Edward resumed. 'I'm not arguing in the face of the facts, that we have had a blow. I understand that only too well. What I'm saying is that getting the confidence of the City isn't the first consideration. Who will the men have confidence in – our men, our drivers – if you vote me out? Think that through to its conclusion, and I feel you'll agree that a change of Chairman and Managing Director might do more harm than good. I may not have experience of the City, but by God I know the haulage business!'

He stopped. He'd rather expected Bill Riley to say 'Hear, hear!' or nod emphatically, but he didn't.

David said: 'Right. Now can I have comments?'

'I disagree with Ted,' Brian said. 'The confidence of the City *is* the first consideration – and the fact that he doesn't recognise that is why—'

'I'm not saying it's unimportant, but it's not the *first* priority—'

'Nobody's explained what the options are,' Bill Riley began.

'Order!' called David. 'Order! I want this meeting to come to order. We can't have everyone talking at once.' The hubbub began to subside. 'I'll take contributions one at a time. Bill, you were trying to say something.'

'Only that we seem to be talking about "confidence" and generalities like that. I'd like summat more concrete. What's

going to happen to the company? The lads who work for us? The people who've put their money in? I'd like somebody to tell me what's to be done. That's all.'

'Right,' said David. 'Jenny?'

Jenny had been burning with impatience to say her piece. She'd heard everyone else talking about the present situation but no one had put it in perspective.

'When people say what a great job Edward's done,' she said with an indignant glance at Martin Farrell, 'and shed crocodile tears and tell him to resign, I'm not impressed! Edward expected to inherit this company from his father but instead his father made a will that put me on the board, and Brian and David as well. I think Edward felt that his birthright had been taken away from him.' Out of the corner of her eye she saw Edward hunch his shoulders as if to protect himself from this cruel memory. 'Not many men would have been big enough to accept that, and try and make it work – but Edward did. He's kept us together, often in spite of ourselves, and *I* know it and *you* know it!'

Brian coloured and stared at the opposite wall. David fidgeted.

'I'm going to say just one more thing, Mr Chairman,' said Jennifer. 'There's only one man that can go on keeping this company together, and that's Edward. If he's ever not sitting in that chair it will be a different company, and I for one would want nothing to do with it!'

The men were quite taken aback by the authority of her remarks. They all knew that she had worked for the company alongside Edward while Robert Hammond was still alive. She understood more about the firm and about Edward than anyone else.

'Well,' said David, 'I think we've heard everyone's views.'

'Except yours, Mr Chairman,' Brian pointed out.

'I prefer the chair to remain neutral, Brian. Now, Martin, you intend to deal with questions in your reply. I personally would like to know what was meant by the word "sanctions".'

Farrell was grave and silent for a moment. Then he said, 'This company like all companies in your position has a cash

problem. You extend three months' rolling credit to your customers, you have to be constantly buying new vehicles and equipment—'

'Which the bank is quite happy to finance,' Edward cut in.

'Let me remind the board that the bank is in turn guaranteed by the merchant bank, Grant, Usher and Kent.'

'Who pay your salary,' Edward couldn't resist saying.

Farrell nodded in calm agreement. 'I have been informed by my principals that, unless they are satisfied with the structure of this board, they intend to withdraw that guarantee at once.'

A silence. Perhaps only Edward heard the swish of the net as it entangled him, the sound of the trident piercing his armour.

'What happens if Grant, Usher and Kent withdraw?' Riley asked, perplexed.

'All our long-term loans would have to be repaid at once,' Brian said. 'And we haven't the money.'

'It's blackmail,' Edward said quietly. 'Either you walk out of here with my head, or your merchant bank – our friends and advisers! – put the boot in.'

'Martin, how could it possibly help Grant, Usher and Kent to force us into a position where we had to go bust?' This was David, quickly opening and closing doors in his mind.

'Should such an event take place, Hammonds would virtually cease operations. Four of you are substantial shareholders to whom my principals could probably make an offer attractive enough to acquire your shares – or at least most.'

'What would they want with a haulage company?'

'They don't want it. They'd sell it to another client, David.'

'Who?' Jennifer asked.

'Borrets,' said David, opening the door he'd been searching for.

'Yes, Borrets,' Farrell agreed.

'Is there some arrangement already in existence?' Jennifer inquired in a voice of ice.

'No, but Sir John Borret has already approached the bank.'

'Suppose that happened, how would it affect Hammonds?' Riley asked. 'What would Borrets do with us?'

'Integrate the company into his group. Sir John doesn't believe in retaining the independence of companies he acquires. I expect he'd also close down certain parts of the operation, with consequent redundancies.'

'What about shareholders?' David said, thinking of Jill.

'Sir John would buy their shares at an agreed price and give them Borrets in exchange. But it wouldn't be a favourable transaction.'

'Well, you've got me carved up nicely,' Edward said.

'Mr Chairman,' Farrell said, 'I want Hammonds to remain the excellent company that it is, not be gobbled up by a huge group like Borrets. But it cannot be done while Edward remains in his present position, because of the City's lack of confidence.'

He stopped speaking, his dark eyes suddenly fastening on David. David knew the moment had come for the vote.

'Those in favour of the proposal that Mr Edward Hammond should resign as Chairman and Managing Director.'

Farrell and Brian put up their hands.

'Two. Those against?'

Edward and Jennifer put up their hands. To Jennifer's astonishment, Bill Riley did not.

'Bill,' she prompted.

'I'm abstaining, Miss Kingsley,' he said.

David shook his head at him. 'I can't force you to vote, Bill. But you have all the duties and obligations of a director now. There's never been a more important decision before this board than this one.'

'I can't vote, Mr Chairman,' Riley burst out. 'How can I? I've listened to what's been said, and some of it, I have to agree with.' He glanced at Edward. 'Yes, Mr Edward, you drop in on me and Frank and Alan, we do expect you to – but we don't like it. We all know what we're doing and we'd rather not have you breathing down our necks.'

Edward stared at Riley in despair. He felt as if his best friend, acting as Emperor at the gladiatorial games, had just given the thumbs-down for him.

'But that's not so important,' Bill said, wrestling with himself. 'It's the company, whether it's going to be here or not,

whether there's going to be jobs, whether or not folk'll get their money back that's put into it. . . .'

'Do what you think is right, Bill,' Edward said. The two men studied each other. 'Use your vote the way you see it.'

'I'm going to take the vote again,' David said. 'Those in favour?'

Farrell raised his hand, Brian also. Then, with the utmost reluctance, Riley.

David said: 'I am also in favour of the motion. Those against?'

Edward and Jennifer put up their hands.

'The motion is carried by four votes to two.'

'You have my immediate resignation, Mr Chairman,' Edward said.

'Thank you.' David hesitated. What happened now?

'Nominations,' Edward prompted.

'What? Oh yes, I'll take nominations for the posts of Chairman and Managing Director.'

At once Brian said: 'I propose Martin Farrell as Chairman.'

'Seconded?' asked David.

No one moved until Bill Riley, as if bleeding to death, said, 'I second.'

'In favour?'

Brian and Riley voted in favour.

'Against?' No one. 'Martin Farrell is appointed Company Chairman. Martin,' David said with vast relief, 'over to you.'

'Thank you,' Farrell said. 'Despite the circumstances, I'll do my utmost for this company. From the chair, I'd like to nominate Brian Hammond as Managing Director.'

'Seconded,' said Edward. And as everyone stared at him in amazement he added bitterly, 'Let him find out what it's like!'

'Those in favour?' Farrell asked. He and Edward were in favour. No one was against. 'Brian Hammond is appointed Managing Director. Before we continue this meeting we should ratify the appointment of Mr Edward Hammond as Technical Director.'

'Don't bother,' Edward said. 'I decline the appointment. I also resign from this board of directors as of now.'

He stalked out of the room. Almost at once Jenny started to get up.

'Jenny, please!' Martin Farrell begged.

'Did you really imagine I'd do anything else?' she answered, and walked out.

Riley leaned over the table. 'Could we adjourn for half an hour, Mr Chairman?' He didn't really wait for the chairman to agree before he went hurrying down the corridor.

It occurred to David that here was an opportunity to ring his mother to give her the news. But the thought no sooner occurred than it was banished. He didn't want to be the bearer of such tidings.

So Mary remained in the suspense and anxiety that had consumed her all day. What made it perhaps even more difficult to bear was the fact that she was not alone. Gwen Riley had arrived as usual; and then, a little before mid-morning, Jill came to visit, with that instinctive kindness that so endeared her to Mary.

At first Mary was glad of the company. She had a design for a baby's pram cover that she intended to embroider for Jill, and there was the family christening robe to show also, unearthed from layers of blue tissue paper.

'It's lovely,' said Jill, fingering the fragile lace. 'Do you mean David was christened in this?'

'All three of my sons.' Suddenly Mary's face threatened to crumple. But she recovered. 'You must take it, Jill dear. For the new grandson.'

'Or granddaughter.'

'Yes.'

'Did Ann have it?'

Mary sighed and turned away. 'Her own parents provided the one she used for Carole and Nigel.'

'Then I promise to use this for Junior,' Jill said. 'Or for Juniora.'

'Juniora!' chuckled Gwen, who was watering Mary's precious plants. 'There's a name!'

'I rather fancy it,' Jill said, keeping up the joke 'I'll try it out on David this evening.' But she knew she wouldn't, and as

the day wore on it became more and more difficult to keep the atmosphere happy.

Gwen had prepared a good lunch of veal cutlets but no one ate much. All three women had good reason for a lack of appetite. Jill was at the stage of her pregnancy where unexpectedly the smell of food would make her feel sick. Mary was too anxious to eat. Gwen, too, had her worries: she thought it unfair of Fate to push her husband into such a terrible position almost as soon as he became a director. Imagine having to vote for or against Mr Edward! It was like being asked to vote for or against the Houses of Parliament, or bread and butter – something that had always been there and didn't need to be discussed.

Each time she passed the phone she glanced at it. When would they ring? Mrs Hammond said that when Mr Edward left that morning, full of confidence, he'd promised to ring through as soon as he won the battle.

Soon after three Gwen suggested she should bring in the tea. 'I suppose they're at it hammer and tongs by now,' she sighed.

'Yes, I expect so,' Mary said.

'Are you feeling all right, Mary?' Jill asked with some anxiety, for there had been a tremor in her mother-in-law's voice.

'I had a restless night,' Mary said. 'You don't know where Brian was, I suppose? I kept trying to ring him until quite late but there was no reply, and then this morning when I tried to get him at the depot his secretary said he was in a meeting and would ring me back. But he didn't.'

'Oh, I expect he's been frightfully busy—'

'Doing what? Planning an attack on his brother? He was avoiding me, Jill. He didn't want to hear what I had to say!'

'You shouldn't let it upset you, Mary—'

'How can I help it? You bring up a family and then, when they're at each other's throats, you're not to interfere. . . .'

'It's a disagreement over how to run a business,' Jill said gently. 'It's not the end of the world.'

Mary took her young hand in her two old ones. 'In some ways it's the end of mine, Jill. It's the oldest story in the world, one brother turning against another for the sake of power.'

Jill had nothing to say in reply to that. Though for her it was

sad and a little upsetting, she had all her life ahead of her and a husband who loved her. Mary had only her pride in her sons – and it's difficult to be proud of men turning on each other.

When tea was over Gwen tried to get back some of the tranquillity of the morning. 'Men are all the same, you know,' she said. 'Whether it's a row about business, or a strike, or a football match, it's the most important thing in the world until it's over – and then they forget all about it.'

Mary shook her head. 'I know you're trying to cheer me up, Gwen, and usually you succeed. But this is important, and I think we all know it.'

'Well, it's affected Bill,' Gwen admitted.

'Thank goodness he's there,' Mary breathed. 'At least no one needs to worry about the loyalty of Mr Riley!'

That was at the very moment when the loyal Mr Riley was raising his hand to register a vote against his employer and long-standing friend, Edward Hammond. When, a few minutes later, he listened to Edward throw his resignation on the table, he felt as if he would just as soon do the same, and when Jenny walked out he almost leapt up to do so too.

But there were men's jobs at stake. Nothing would be solved, nothing would be improved, if Bill Riley threw up the sponge. Years as a trade union committee-man had taught him that the only way to achieve anything was to keep on keeping on. As they said where he came from: 'Tha'lt gain nowt by giving oop.'

He went quickly down the passage to Edward's office when the adjournment came.

Edward, head-on to every event, was already clearing the drawers of his desk, with Jenny standing by. 'What shall we do, Jenny?' he said.

'What would you like to do?'

'How about raising some money, buying up a little lorry firm—'

'You're off then,' Riley said, interrupting this pipe dream.

'I've had it, Bill. Right up to here.' Suddenly Edward's shoulders sagged.

'I *wanted* to back you,' Riley said. 'But I couldn't.'

'Yeh. A fine friend in need you turned out to be!'

'What happened to all that talk about keeping the board together? This doesn't look like "together",' Bill said, wagging a hand at the desk drawer's contents.

'That was when I thought I was going to win.'

'Oh, I see. It only cuts one way, does it?'

'There's nothing else he can do, Bill,' Jennifer said, blinking back tears.

'Isn't there? What was that you said – magnanimous in victory. What about being magnanimous in defeat?'

Magnaminous in defeat. A new philosophical concept. Forgive the trident-man for making holes in you in front, and your brother for stabbing you in the back.

'Besides,' Riley said, 'what the hell will they do without you?'

The remaining directors were drinking tea when Edward strode in with Jennifer and Riley at his heels. 'What exactly does it involve, being Technical Director?' he asked.

An unexpected smile that was almost delight lit up Martin Farrell's face. 'Doing all the things you enjoy doing.'

'I'll take it,' Edward said.

David came to thump him on the back. Brian, he noticed, was less effusive. When he went to get a cup of tea from Jenny at the refreshment table, Edward glanced back at them. 'Martin and Brian,' he murmured. 'A banker and an accountant. They're the king pins, these days.'

Jenny gave a little head-shake that made her soft hair swing. 'Do they really know what it's all about?' she mused. 'I don't think so. I think, eventually, you'll be back where you belong.'

Where did he belong? He'd thought he knew until this board meeting. Now he wasn't so sure. But it would be interesting, finding out.

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But Brian had his own problems. His wife Ann was fighting hard to keep her lover, Nicholas Fox, and when he left her, she was determined to hold on to her suddenly-successful h[illegible]d.
Instead of the bright future they had l[illegible] forward to, the Hammond brothers f[illegible] failure.

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